THE PATTERN OF CHANCE

GORDON GARDINER

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By Gordon Gardiner

A YOUNG Englishman of good family, but bad upbringing, is convicted of theft, and, after serving a term of imprisonment, sails for South Africa to begin life anew. There, aided by friends and his own better qualities, he makes a promising start. But the shadows of the past persist, and ostracism and loneliness follow. At his darkest moment he is plunged into an adventure of love and mystery that marches to an extraordinary climax.

The theme is both poignant and exciting, while the little up-country town, with its English traditions, provides a novel setting, unfamiliar in South African fiction, for the mysterious events and vividly depicted characters of the tale: the hero himself, the lovely daughter of Colonel Fane, Baluka, the Zulu chieftain, the Carletons, Timms the clerk, and the colorful Doctor Nivens.

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THE PATTERN OF CHANCE

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THE PATTERN OF CHANCE

BY
GORDON GARDINER
Author of 'At the House of Dree'

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TO
W. B. C.
(1878–1910)
IN REMEMBRANCE

The author disclaims all knowledge of the flora, fauna, seasons, and dialects of Cape Colony. This is possibly the only book regarding South Africa in existence where the word 'kopje' never occurs. In writing his story he has relied wholly on memories, authentic but capricious, of more than a quarter of a century ago.

THE
PATTERN OF CHANCE

⁂

CHAPTER I

The fog of a November evening, thirty years ago, stole over the dreary expanse surrounding Her Majesty's Prison at Wormwood Scrubs. In a grimly appropriate silence it eddied up the outer walls, crept across the empty yards, and, scaling the faces of the four great Halls, wreathed itself about the lines of grated windows as though, to adjust the vagaries of history, a spirit that was the negation of freedom were assaulting another and vaster Bastille.

Five o'clock struck from the Gate Tower, the chime sounding muffled and dissonant through the blanket of vapor. Punctually, with the slow precision of minute guns, iron doors began to slam along the landings of 'B' Hall, filling the vast twilight of the interior with dull reverberations. Herded by formidable persons in blue, grotesquely attired figures had assembled, grouped by squads, on each gallery. Shuffling in file, they were vanishing, one by one, with the metallic clang of automatons, across dim thresholds that stretched in apparently endless succession along the tiers of open corridors on both sides of the structure.

Smoothly, and with a due regard to the quality of mercy, the machine of Justice was functioning. For each inmate of those four hundred cells another day had ticked off its sentence; for each, in a silence which no whisper from the outside world could disturb, the uncountable hours of another night had begun.

Some third of the way up the vacant expanse of stone flags the officer on duty leaned over his desk — dwarfed by his surroundings like a solitary worshiper in a cathedral. A tongue of gas flickered and whistled faintly at the end of an iron standard clamped to the woodwork. Behind, the lofty pseudo-Gothic window on the entrance wall had darkened from dingy gray to the murk of fog and evening. Through the infiltering haze the immense enclosed space receded before him within parallels of wavering jets fixed at intervals over the lines of doorways that rose, like the layers of some mechanized catacomb, into the darkness above; in an undiffused and dwindling glimmer the towering pattern of yellow points converged upon the void of the distant end wall.

Nothing of the familiar or human was revealed amid the gleams and shadows of that now deserted vista. Its effect was bizarre, anomalous, vaguely disturbing. The unities of architecture were as absent from its scheme as were the normal uses of mankind from its purpose. In the ogives of the walls at either end of the blackened pavement, in the shrouded arch of the roof, there lurked a travesty of sacred design — impressively borne out by the soaring proportions and more than cloistral stillness of the whole. But, incongruous as a din of machinery through the hush of a mass, a network of steel struck across the perspective. Gangways dizzily spanning the gulf between the upper stories led to open staircases, the polished rails of which zigzagged downward through the gloom like the fittings of a gigantic engine room, whence the contents had inexplicably disappeared. Massive twin flues of underground furnaces piercing the emptiness midway, and greasy reflections from pipes and metal supports lining the walls, furthered the illusion of a leviathan hull, dismantled but sedulously tended, in some colossal drydock.

In effects alike so discordant and magnified the eye lost touch with reality, as in the unstable dimensions of a dream; amid such space and silence imagination strayed to unaccustomed regions. Given the now fashionable theory that the criminal is but the victim of unbalanced mental states, the Victorian gaol builders would seem to have been inspired by a prophetic if somewhat sinister instinct for what was fitting in his accommodation. Of the maleficent promptings that may have visited an inmate of such abodes while he was yet at large among his fellows, not one, however somber or fantastic, but would find within these precincts the welcome of a home.

The detonation of banging locks had died away in the remoteness of the topmost landing. Before the doorway of 'B 4/49,' the end cell at the summit of the left wall, a youth bearing on his squalid livery the broad arrows of a hard-labor prisoner wheeled and came to attention. The warder at his elbow stretched over and took a card from the tin frame attached to the jamb; leaning toward an adjacent gas burner he scrawled in pencil across the surface the words, 'For discharge.' Slipping the label back in its place he turned, and, with an impassive but not ungenial wink, jerked his arm. As the other vanished within, the door crashed and the key revolved with a soft double click.

Humming under his breath, the officer retraced his steps, swung himself down the series of stairways and marched up the echoing floor. As he passed the desk he raised his hand to the peak of his cap, 'All correct, sir.'

Alone among the communities of mankind prison officers must address with the formal 'sir' their colleagues of whatever rank, superior, equal, or inferior. Thus are all ears within those walls attuned to a respect on which not merely discipline but the lives of those who wield it depend.

The warder on duty looked up from his roll-books, 'Right! good-night, sir.'

'Night, sir.'

A minute later the entrance door closed with a last resonant boom. As the rumble died down the officer at the desk raised his head and cast a dispassionate but vigilant glance along the silent galleries.

CHAPTER II

A WINTRY sun had dispelled the mists of the previous day, and the London squares were filled with a subdued, gilded radiance. The pavements were crowded and passing carriages revealed glimpses of the neatly bonneted profiles and curly-brimmed silk hats of the 'nineties.

My aunt's brougham drew up at the curb; I followed her up the steps, and while depositing my own glossy hat on the hall table I saw the butler incline his shirt-front confidentially. 'Mrs. Trevor has just sent round, my lady, to ask if she and Miss Madeline could dine to-night. They are to be in town for a couple of days before they leave for Italy.'

My aunt paused and pulled off a glove. 'Er — Miss Madeline did you say?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'Oh — No. I'm afraid not to-night. Say I'll be delighted if they will come to-morrow either for luncheon or dinner. Is any one waiting?'

'Yes, my lady, Mrs. Trevor s maid.'

'Wait a moment — I'll give her a note.' My aunt crossed towards the library. 'Oh, in case I forget, Bland, we shall want breakfast at eight to-morrow. Mr. John is leaving at nine-twenty from Waterloo.'

'Very good, my lady.' The butler turned into the dining-room and vanished behind a folding screen. Stepping after him, I was about to call an instruction about waking me when I heard his voice.

''E's off to-morrow. You 'ave 'im packed by eight-thirty. Order a 'ansom.'

'Good business!' The volatile tones of William, the first footman, replied. 'Wot about finding a spoon or two, or three or four, or more or so, rolled up in 'is pants?'

'Less lip, young fellow. When I want any remarks from you about the family I'll let you know. Get on with it.' Old Bland's reputation for putting people in their place extended beyond the circle of his subordinates; as I slipped back across the threshold I felt a passing sympathy for William. His little joke had been legitimate enough: I had left B 4/49, Wormwood Scrubs, that morning.

What more need I write of all that? Very little, I think. I have no mind — nor indeed have I the qualifications — to retail the adventures of a gentleman-crook; this story has another intention. Fortunately readers of contemporary fiction have become so versed in situations such as that which confronted me as I stared from my bedroom window over the leafless trees of Mayfair, the afternoon of my release, that it would be not merely a waste of time but a reflection on their intelligence to enlarge on the pitiful comedy that led up to it. The characters, even the *mise-en-scène*, would be wearisomely familiar. An only child immured in a big country house; a father estranged by domestic tragedy; a wicked governess, French to the point of being named Nanette, in charge of a gang of neglected and indifferent servants — they have all been used a hundred times. The subsequent rape of innocence by the combined assaults of villainy, fear, and loneliness may be taken as read.

Lest I be in danger, however, of alienating the sympathies of the reader by seeming to overtax, on my own behalf, the venerable defense of circumstances and evil communications, I must plead that behind it lie alike the mysteries of fate and the facts of life. In the nature of things this tale must open with a confession of crime, but my personal responsibility in the guilt is a subject too obscure for me to embark on; for I began to steal before I was three.

Nanette taught me to be a thief, as she taught me everything during those years which the Jesuit fathers — no bad authorities — are said to regard as the most critical in human experience. As an instructress of youth she was unrivaled, by reason of the adoration and terror she inspired in my infant heart. Perhaps these emotions may sound suspiciously of a piece with the rest of the picture. I can but state that to this day, after the lapse of nearly half a century, it is with a vague disquiet that I recall their naïveté and passion....

I suppose she was as near being thoroughly evil as an apparently normal woman can arrive at. She had been my mother's maid; and when scandal had done its work and my father brought a suit for divorce she was the principal witness against her mistress. Thereafter she remained in his service, quietly gathering to herself the reins of the household, and especially those which, with the removal of my mother, had dropped unheeded about my small neck.

To the frigid Gallic rapacity of her type she allied considerable ability and a refinement of looks and manner — or perhaps merely an absence of Anglo-Saxon lower-class characteristics — which intimidated the servants and gratified my childish fastidiousness. I do not remember that she ever showed me affection, but at the bidding of caprice or self-interest she employed or withheld a unique gift of companionship that bewitched me to a blind devotion.

Judging from contemporary photographs, I must have been a decorative child, and, although I was seldom allowed to appear downstairs, the golden-haired ladies who used to arrive in parties for the week-ends (my father had apparently sought consolation on what was then known as the Gayety stage) petted and spoiled me surreptitiously as far, and in such directions, as my governess permitted. Exactly at what age, or how, it all began I have no recollection, but among my first memories are those of the reward of Nanette's cold smile when I brought her a lace handkerchief or veil or pair of gloves purloined from one of the beautiful ladies' bedrooms. My sensations during the actual exploit are a blank, save for a faintly surviving and not unpleasing thrill (especially preserved in connection with the plunder of a glittering hat-pin, which must have been an exceptional feat). But the result of those adventures, whether success or failure, has left a vivid enough impress; at Nanette's hands it meant, for an ill-defined period, my joy or grief. Of the existence of any other scheme of rewards and punishments not a hint ever penetrated to that unvisited nursery.

From this prologue of juvenile, if ambiguous, lights and shadows I had wished to hasten. My story is concerned with a larger fate than any which lay in Nanette's chilly grasp; with the dealings of that hidden sister of destiny whom men call chance, who, in the years to come, amid despair and the trappings of horror, brought me to that which awaited under other and happier stars. But, as I write, the recognition grows that what had seemed to be, at worst, impatience, is merely cowardice. I cannot, while thus hiding myself, be faithful to those wider implications. A reference, however brief, to the further impulses, not only external but from within, that launched me on my way, is due.

Illness and a prolonged convalescence, toward the close of my eighth year, carried me first to the Riviera and then to Switzerland. Thereafter Nanette and I oscillated between pensions at Nice and Vevey until, recalled by my father, she lodged me at his orders in a preparatory school 'conducted on English lines' on the outskirts of Lausanne. Of the following years I need only record that to judge from the practices in vogue at that establishment, mine cannot have been the only or worst Nanette at large on the continent of Europe. Pilfering was among the less deleterious of the accomplishments possessed by those fledglings of Russian, Italian, and Turkish nests who shared my exile by the shores of Lac Léman. Oddly enough, I cannot remember participating in what might well have been my special line; mainly, perhaps, because its exponents among my fellows failed to attract me. Whatever my record, I had no taste, then or later, for criminal society.

That, indeed, in spite of my opportunities, I had developed no very marked turn for dishonesty is, I venture to think, borne out by the fact that it was not until my third year at Eton that fate overtook me. In a life where irony has played strange parts, not the least singular of its vagaries was that the motive behind my first officially detected lapse was merely a youthful appetite. It was, in short, like a more celebrated fall, a question of fruit. On entering a companion's study I happened to catch sight of its occupant placing some pears in a cupboard; after locking the door he slipped the key into the pocket of a jacket lying on a chair and dashed past me along the passage, shouting that he would be back in a minute. My allowance — probably the scantiest of any youth's in the house — did not run to pears. The owner was by way of being a friend of mine; if the things had been left on the table, whence he had just removed them, school-boy etiquette would have suffered little had I helped myself, provided of course I had told him of the fact on his return. I had no thought of wrong-doing; the excitement — indefinable, but curiously specific in character — that in the later years of childhood had come to associate itself with the illicit adventures I have described, was totally absent. But, alas, those finer sensibilities that lie behind conventional honesty had, in my case, been blunted; they failed now to prick me from the edge that yawns on the right hand and on the left of the path of conduct. I drew the key from its hiding place and was in the act of opening the cupboard when the head boy of the house vaulted over the sill and, seizing my shoulder, asked what I was 'up to.' He had no knowledge of the pears; while passing the widely opened window he had seen me in another youth's room fumbling at a jacket and making use of a key that obviously did not belong to me.

I am truthful by nature, if not by training, but, although my conscience was clear enough, I was frightened — there was that within me which was fatally open along certain lines to intimidation by authority. My stammerings turned suspicion into certainty; I was hailed before my house master. Investigations revealed the damning fact that there was money as well as fruit in the cupboard, and my father was sent for. However far to seek his affections toward me might be, he had, as an old Etonian, no lack of sentiment regarding the honor of the school; he arrived the following day. My protestations of innocence had made just sufficient impression to permit of the matter being hushed up, and I escaped formal expulsion at the price of the, to me, even more grim ordeal of departing forthwith in his company. In a reserved first-class carriage he vented the accumulated hatred born of what he termed our 'unnatural relationship' — for, in his fury, he revealed, as a demon is released from a trap, the fact (if such it be) that I was his son only in name.

At this juncture, when the fiends of a malign destiny did seem to be closing in on me, a good fairy, in the shape of my Aunt Helen, flew to my aid. Until then she had been little more than an enchanting but rarely seen portent in my life. Her husband being a Colonial Governor, she was seldom in England during my childhood, and Nanette's antagonism had placed every obstacle in the way of our relations. But she wielded considerable influence with my father. Beloved in many circles of society (she was a leader among the 'Souls' of those far-off days), she combined a naïve and engaging freedom from the prejudices of her family with a pelican-like devotion to any and all of its members who might be in adversity. She had the rare quality of being without the inclination to criticism in any issue; with the result that in the present case she was able to soften the disaster of my return without seeming to take my side against her brother.

She succeeded in averting his intention of disowning me, and offered to carry me back with her to Australia. Unfortunately, by an evil chance, my father heard of a clergyman who made a speciality of receiving 'unsatisfactory' scions of the upper classes in his vicarage in Kent. From this fate even Aunt Helen failed to rescue me, and, her time at home being up, I was left to my doom.

After two ghastly years in that clerical reformatory, I was released to be apprenticed to a firm of wine merchants. Within twelve months the blow fell which hostile conjunctions and the defects of my own character had prepared.

The immediate cause of my downfall was nothing more august than a hole in the waistcoat pocket of my extremely shabby suit. While returning from an afternoon's errand to an agent of the firm outside London I found to my horror that I had lost three sovereigns handed to me in payment of an account. It is hard to convey the state of panic to which I was reduced by this discovery. I received an annual salary of fifteen pounds and an allowance of eighty-five; on one hundred pounds a year I had to support life in my Pimlico lodgings. To make good the deficiency from my own resources was impossible, and there was literally no one to whom at the moment I could turn for help. I was due at the office on my arrival and must render an account of my mission. Whether my father had let fall anything of my past when he had obtained the post for me (one of the partners was an acquaintance of his) I do not know — a hint may have come from elsewhere; but from the start I had been conscious of being regarded, if not with suspicion, at least with the dubious air all too familiar to a youth 'under a cloud.'

The only other occupant of the third-class carriage was a fat, overdressed woman (she turned out subsequently to be, like myself, 'in the trade') on the corner seat opposite. Immediately after we started she fell asleep and began to snore. Presently her muff slipped from her lap; as I bent to pick it up the train jolted over some points and, from the recesses of the lining, a purse dropped with an unmistakable chink of coin on the floor by my hand.

To those who, reading thus far, have been pained by an apparent lack of the shame becoming to the narrator of such a history, the moment for atonement has arrived. It is with an ever-fresh humiliation that I pause to review for the thousandth time the turning-point of my life.

On that occasion I can plead no absence of warning. The quiver of a long-forgotten, vaguely seductive thrill ran through my veins, bringing illumination as only abruptly awakened memory can, and with it, overwhelmingly, a breathless relief — here was a way of escape from my terror — a way that I *knew*.... The woman was snoring louder than ever: I slid up the clasp. Inside were some coppers and silver and, in a side pocket, five or six sovereigns. I extracted three, replaced the purse and laid the muff gently on the seat.

After seemingly endless minutes we arrived at Paddington; as the carriage moved along the platform I opened the door. With a spout of oaths the woman leaped up, pushed me aside and leaned out screaming and gesticulating. A porter was by each window; at her clamor of accusation they stared at me. I suppose my face was enough; one of them caught my arm while the other whistled shrilly on his fingers and waved his hand. A policeman marched up. As our little procession made its way through the crowd to a cab the woman kept shouting, 'I can prove it! Don't you let go of 'im. I can show the pocket the 'ound 'as them in....'

The First Offender's Act was new and little regarded in those days. At the Old Bailey I was sentenced to three months' hard labor.

Of that period I do not propose to write. A term of imprisonment is different, not in degree but in kind, from any other human experience. In certain aspects it is surprisingly less bad, in others immeasurably worse than can be imagined; to define its influences alike in detail and in the unquenchable volume of their aggregate would require pages that have no place here. For my preface is ended. Behind the iron doors of Wormwood Scrubs I had come, for better or for worse, to maturity. It is of what befell the young man who, with release and degradation in his heart, watched the crimson disk of the wintry sun vanish behind the roofs of Grosvenor Square that I have to tell.

Across the gulf of years that last night in England is significant more by reason of what is forgotten than because of its surviving memories. My aunt's delicious food, the indescribable sense of recaptured well-being, the elation of the drive through the glittering evening streets to the Savoy (I have never seen a Gilbert and Sullivan Opera since), even the companionship of the one person in the world in whose eyes I could find the refuge of an unaltering affection — all is veiled in retrospect as it was deadened at the time by a state of mind that had the quality more of a novel and penetrating sensation than of connected thought. As I sat in the darkened stalls, through the music and gayety on the stage, I was hearing old Bland's confidentially lowered voice giving Cousin Mary Trevor's message, and my aunt's reply; and, as if in some unfamiliar region of my consciousness a sixth sense were coming into action, I saw illumined in my own brain their thoughts, jostling and crowding behind the words. With a sort of perverted glee (born, I now realize, of the characteristic neurasthenia which in these more humane days has succeeded gaol fever as the scourge of prison life) I allowed the conviction to take hold that henceforth I should be able, unerringly, to see what those around were thinking of me.

How amazingly clear it all seemed once that extra sense had got to work.... If Cousin Mary (my mind revolved in wheels round that conversation in the hall) had been alone, perhaps the answer would have been different; elderly people are supposed to be more or less immune from moral contamination. But Madeline ——

In the exercise of my newly acquired gift, I found myself smiling as I leaned back beside my aunt on the homeward drive; a remark of her husband's had come back to me. 'The trouble with Helen,' he had said jestingly in my hearing, 'is that she has no moral standards.' Well, such as they were, her standards had been quite adequate for the purpose of enabling her to recognize that, although they had been playmates together, one could not place at dinner a girl of eighteen next ex-prisoner B 4/49. It had required but little practice in my fatal accomplishment to detect that particular process at work.

So, when the moment came to say good-night, amid my stammered expressions of thanks I was reading, as in a book, her feelings of relief and deliverance at my approaching departure. Then suddenly (sweet as she always was, it had rarely been her habit to show emotion) she reached up and kissed me, and I felt her lashes wet on my cheek. For a second my brain seemed to slip into an enchanted quiet; the torturing, masterless suspicions took flight and vanished.... But as she released me and turned, her handkerchief to her eyes, across the darkened hall, and I stumbled up the stairs, like a swarm of bees they buzzed back and settled again in black clusters.

Next afternoon I sailed from Southampton for the Cape. It was a lonely departure. Aunt

Helen came with me to the station, but those were the great days of the Chartered Company, and a number of well-known people were gathered round the doors of the boat train. So, to avoid unwelcome meetings and explanations, we said a hurried farewell at the barrier. I never saw her again.

CHAPTER III

On looking back I find the impressions left by my voyage to South Africa curiously vague. Those three weeks of sunlit airs and repose seem now like a period of convalescence, set between a horrible illness and the effort and anxieties of facing again the business of living.

Amid the rather squalid surroundings of the *Norham Castle's* second class I escaped into an obscurity and forgetfulness that resembled a species of coma. In spite of youth the inevitable reaction following my discharge had exhausted me mentally and physically; in the crowded little cabin, which I shared with a fat Johannesburg Jew and a consumptive theological student from Edinburgh, I found the deliverance of dreamless nights, and, lulled by the gray calm of the Bay, through long afternoons I slept heavily again.

From Point Finisterre onward we sailed on summer seas. The cloudless skies and gentle southern winds, which to my companions seemed merely a welcome change from the fogs of England, brought to me, with the shadows of 'B Hall' on my heart and its chill in my bones, the benediction of a measureless peace.

Ocean travel, thirty years ago, still retained a quality now somewhat far to seek. Even mail boats had not yet managed to disguise their nautical characteristics in those of an American hotel; undisturbed by chatterings from invisible continents, the heavens preserved their immemorial silence, save for the voice of the trades or the squawk of an adventurous gull. Day after day amid the eternal but always changing horizons my mind hovered in a sort of gulf, as though poised between an ever receding past and a mysterious but still distant future.

Temperament and events alike had made me reserved with strangers, and among the oddly assorted crowd of clerks, up-country traders, bookmakers, and emigrant nondescripts, male and female, that surrounded me, I made few acquaintances. Save for violent interludes of deck cricket, when my services were peremptorily demanded by a black-browed sergeant of the Bechuanaland Border Police, my days were passed under the awning, my feet on the bulwark-rail, reading, dozing, and gazing before me.... The ever-mounting glory of the noon, the unspeakable luxury of freedom amid such boundless immensities of space and light fascinated me as by a spell. In the evenings my cabin-mate the divinity student — a silent but rather charming young man, obviously very ill — and I would make our way through the deserted, gently swaying darkness for'ard until, wedged on either side of the bowsprit, with the foam exploding softly in phosphorescent splendor below, we would watch new constellations rise out of the blackness ahead, which, to both of us, although for vastly different reasons, presented the emblem of a somber and formidable enigma.

But the moods of the sea and of life have much in common; in both, peace is but an interlude. Towards the end of the last week on board we were roused from our afternoon slumber literally with a crash, as though we had burst through the confines of our enchanted world into the turmoil of outer chaos. Within a few moments the memories of those halcyon hours were blown behind us in cataracts of chilly spray; from plunging, streaming decks the solid-seeming company of my fellow-passengers vanished as though by the wave of a magician's wand.

So it turned out (for I was an indifferent sailor) that oblivion, if not tranquillity, accompanied me to the end of my journey; in the torpor of sea-sickness I was at least spared those forebodings that are apt to gather at the approach of landfalls more auspicious than mine could claim to be.

And when at last we anchored, some hours after sunset, in Table Bay, it was amid a scene so dazzling and exotic that, after the buffetings of the previous days, I was conscious of little save of a languid amazement. While we were at dinner the awnings had been rolled back, and on mounting the ladder to the top deck I emerged into a world of white radiance, unfamiliar and, to eyes accustomed to the tempered beams of northern nights, almost startling.

A full moon hung above the cliffs and bastions of Table Mountain; on the still water stretching below the amphitheater of the range we were as though suspended in a bottomless crater of light. The crystalline brilliance on all sides confused and betrayed one's vision. In a medium so limpid effects of distance were both magnified and reduced; on summits remote and unreal like those of a dream glittering surfaces seemed to disclose the configuration of individual rocks, or the silver texture of some secluded torrent.

As I leaned on the bulwark and gazed at the pale jewel-like lamps of Cape Town clustering round the base of the tremendous precipices and strewed along the foothills toward the great continent beyond, a conviction, sudden and unforeseen, stirred in my heart that whatever lay before me under such a sky and through such portals would be, in a thrillingly significant meaning of the words, something 'different' — something profoundly *new*.... And in that thought there awoke an almost forgotten and passionate hope.

Next morning, after taking a room at the rather dubious-looking but inexpensive hotel recommended to me by the purser, I wandered out to explore the daylight aspect of my surroundings.

No more charming threshold to a strange land could be imagined than Cape Town of the 'nineties. Stretching from the shores of Table Bay to the flowering greenery climbing about the foot of the Mountain, few cities were ever so magnificently situated. Save for the long sweep of Adderley Street and its immediate neighborhood it was, for the most part, a place of small white- or blue-washed houses, flat-roofed and with 'stoeps' projecting into the roadway; while here and there a spacious and characteristically flat façade of many windows, dating from Dutch colonial days, presented an old-world, continental effect. In its contrasts of littleness and surrounding grandeur, of the ancient and the new, of things European and the colors and smells, the Kaffirs and outlandish wares of the enormous hinterland lying in sunlit mystery beyond its suburbs, the spirit of the place was both romantic and exciting. And ever, as one traversed the rather ramshackle streets, soaring above the housetops were the wonderful, shining walls of the Mountain, with the shadows of the clouds sailing across them — always higher, always more imminent in the translucent air than the eye expected.

But, fascinated as I was by all about me that morning of arrival, there lay on my mind as I walked, like a spot of darkness on the sunshine, the consciousness of a letter in my breast pocket. No clearer proof of the gulf that divided me from my fellows could have been afforded than the shrinking I discovered in myself when faced with the duty of stamping and posting that envelope addressed in my aunt's familiar handwriting. On a palm-shaded seat in the Botanical Gardens I examined it for the tenth time since landing. It was, in effect, a passport to that world of possibilities, vague but alluring, of which I had dreamed under the spell of last night's moon — now, in the brightness and exhilaration of the morning, lying before me. And yet, as I turned it over in my hand, it assumed the import of a talisman fraught with ambiguous and sinister powers which, when resorted to, must inevitably transform this gay, impersonal scene into an affair of agitating realities.

The letter of introduction — for such it was — was addressed to a friend of my family's, a Mr. Charles Bentinck, who had been, as a young man, on the staff of my great-uncle when the latter was Governor of the Cape, and who, on retiring from the Colonial Service many years later, had settled down to end his days (his health had always been indifferent) under the azure skies of the Peninsula.

My aunt had told me these facts in a letter I had received from her while in prison; indeed it was largely in the hope of enlisting Mr. Bentinck's influence on my behalf that she had urged me to seek my fortune in South Africa. Of what she had written to this friend of other days regarding myself nothing was said. But, miserable and overwrought as I was, it had not occurred to me for an instant to doubt her ability to deal with so dubious a task; in a unique degree she possessed that *intelligence du cœur* (I can think of no English equivalent) which inspires even in such a situation the completest confidence.

Now, as I sat painfully irresolute, scoring the gravel of the path with my stick, her glance when she gave me the letter rose before me: she had just embraced me in farewell on leaving the house and our eyes had met almost for the last time.... I got to my feet. Across the blinding, noonday street a pillar box glowed redly, like a familiar beacon; taking a breath, I slipped over and dropped the letter inside.

And when, two mornings later, in response to an invitation to luncheon I followed a terra-cotta-hued road between hot, leafy hedges strewn with roses and the incredible blue of the plumbago flower, to a verandahed house lying beneath an outlying spur of the Mountain, I found that my trust in her had not been misplaced.

Mr. Bentinck received me with a sort of watchful intimacy which, odd as it may sound, I felt to be infinitely reassuring. His manner suggested, more than anything, that of a guardian who had not seen his ward for a number of years and was frankly interested in discovering what kind of a fellow he had grown into. The point, of course, so far as I was concerned, was that he seemed naturally to accept some such relationship. The word 'home' has been defined by an American writer as signifying 'the only place on God's earth where they have to take you in whether they want to or not.' Mr. Bentinck improved on that — he made me welcome; but the spirit of the idea was present in his attitude. And I, who had been dogged even in my childhood by a sense of insecurity in my nearest ties, felt in this unknown house suddenly at ease.

He kept me until the shadows of the pines began to lengthen on the lawn; then, turning to a writing table at a window behind us, he took a sheet of paper from the rack. 'I dare say we could find you something here ——' with his pen poised he fingered his clipped white beard.

'Oh, I would rather go up-country,' I said hastily.

He nodded. 'Yes... I dare say.' He bent on me a reflective stare. 'I expect you're wise. Better not try to rush things,' he murmured, and began to write.

A few minutes later he walked with me down the steps. 'Send me a line in a couple of days saying how things are going,' he tapped the envelope in my hand. 'I do very little entertaining now, but if you won't mind being alone, come to lunch on Sunday.' His eyes wandered to the towering ridge above us, now faintly pink in the afternoon light. 'When you write thank Lady Helen for sending you. One misses people out here....' With a wave of his hand he turned indoors.

As things happened, his introduction served its purpose within twenty-four hours. Next morning, in a vast, barn-like building with rows of Venetian-shuttered windows set in immensely thick walls I was hurried up and down ancient staircases from one cool, darkened room to another, where official figures rose out of the gloom, shook hands politely, read Mr. Bentinck's note, and, after a murmur to the clerk accompanying me, shook hands again and sank back to their spectral labors.

Finally, in a chamber like a loft, lined with cupboards, I found myself seated before a neatly bearded little man with a foreign intonation oddly tinged with cockney (the characteristic accent, I learned later, of the Dutch colonial) and suave, distant manners. He wasted no words. Within a quarter of an hour, after providing details of my age, education, and business experience, I was told that I was appointed to a temporary clerkship in the Public Works Department at King George's Town, given a brief summary of my duties, handed a railway voucher, and directed to leave for my destination the following morning. By this time I had realized, to my overwhelming relief, that, as a protégé of a higher and presumably unpopular authority, I was an object on which this person (he was some sort of chief clerk) was determined to bestow no more than the minimum of notice demanded by his duty. Indeed, on looking back I suspect that, 'to compare great things with small,' I have to thank the notoriously strained relations then existing (it was the year of the Jameson Raid) between Dutch and English in the Colony — nowhere more pronounced than in official circles — for the ease with which I scraped through an interview that, with a record such as mine, might well have been disastrous.

On emerging into the forenoon blaze, so lost was I in the sense of deliverance from what had been, for months past, a nightmare accompanying every thought of future employment, that I had wandered for some minutes before I remembered that if I was to see and thank the friend to whom I owed my good fortune it must be within the next few hours. Hailing a Cape-cart, I told the driver, a ferocious looking black with bare arms and a disreputable check waistcoat dangling open on his perspiring chest, to go to the General Post Office. There I sent a telegram to Mr. Bentinck announcing my news and saying that, if convenient, I would call at tea-time.

I found him in his library, a large room with widely opened French windows on both sides shaded by verandahs. The polished, almost empty floor reflected as in a pool the glow of bindings on the shelves and the sheen of glass panels entirely covering the intervening wall-space, behind which were arranged exquisitely colored designs of the wild flowers and heaths for which the Cape Peninsula is famous. This — the classification and drawing of the innumerable species collected during his residence on the slopes of Table Mountain — was his hobby; in it he had found compensation for exile, and made a name among botanists in both hemispheres.

As I entered he laid aside a sheet of cardboard on which he had been affixing a dried but still gorgeous bloom; sinking back in his chair, he pointed to a seat. 'Shall we have tea here? I am rather tired, and this eternal glare ——' he peered over his shoulders at a vista of sun-scorched lawn bordered by the smouldering reds of canna-lilies and geraniums.

When the Malay butler had left us he listened in silence to my thanks and enthusiasms — I doubt if ever before I had been so loquacious with any one — from time to time directing at me one of the keen, contemplative glances with which I had become familiar.

He smiled when I had finished. 'It isn't much — they might have found something better. Still,' he put down his cup, 'it's a start.'

I nodded — like a stab of physical pain reawakened memory kept me silent.

He averted his eyes slowly. 'And I think you'll like King George's Town. It's rather charming in an old-fashioned, out-of-the-world way. Very English — they pride themselves on that. I haven't been there for twenty years, but I don't fancy it has altered much.' He rested his chin on his hand and gazed before him. 'Your aunt will be interested in your going there. As a matter of fact she and I spent nearly a week at King George's Town together, ages ago. It was with your great-uncle — an official visit. Lady Helen was spending a year at Government House, and she came with us. She was very young then, of course. I was Private Secretary.... It was just about this time of year — early summer; and there were shooting trips in the forest and dances and moonlight picnics. She enjoyed it all very much....' He climbed stiffly to his feet. 'I hope you'll be happy there.'

The blaze of the afternoon was dying down. Stepping on to the verandah, my companion signaled to a native servant flitting among the chairs at the far end. 'You'll stay to dinner? Unless perhaps your packing ——'

'Oh, no,' I said quickly, 'I'd like to stay, please.'

In a candle-lit dining-room with wonderful scentless roses among the silver and glass on the table, and afterwards on the verandah, amid the unaccustomed noises of a southern night, I spent what seemed to me at the time the happiest evening of my life. The consciousness, not merely of relief from an ever-present weight of indebtedness (my allowance had been stopped at the date of my conviction, and I owed my passage to Africa and the very coins then in my pocket to my aunt's generosity), but of a new world of opportunity opening before me, filled each moment with a nearly unrecognizable sense of well-being; while, beneath the surface of actual thought, like a warm current about my heart, stirred the springs of a deeper and yet more poignant hope....

And for this, beyond all the rest, I was indebted to the figure beside me, scarcely discernible in the darkness but for a faint sheen of white hair and pointed beard. In his company I had been made to feel, from the moment of his greeting, that it was on myself — on what I had it in me to be — rather than on what I had done, that the verdict would lie. The very scrutiny to which he had subjected me had held a subtle and inestimable encouragement, for behind it was implied the belief that in spite of the past I was worth a humane attention. Even during the respite of the voyage the shadow of the doom which the world pronounces on such as I was (immeasurably more destroying in its unreasoned finality than any sentence of the Law) had lain across my spirit, ever waiting to darken and distort my reactions to all around me; but now, for the time being at least, the clouds had been dispelled by a relationship that, to my grateful and ardent imaginings, seemed to reflect in itself the promise of these serene skies under which it had arisen.

When at length the moment came to say good-bye Mr. Bentinck strolled with me along the drive. The moon was rising over the Mountain, pouring down the cliffs and escarpments above us a silent cascade of brilliance. In the shadow of the oak trees by the gate he held out his hand. It was characteristic of his attitude to me that even in the intimacy of this last evening (for in spite of the difference in age it had amounted to that) our talk had been confined almost entirely to general topics — to mutual friends and associations in England, to local history and politics, and to the life up-country that lay before me.

Now, at the moment of parting, when I had finished my stumbling words of thanks; his fingers tightened on mine. 'Remember, my boy,' he said suddenly, 'how *long* life is.' Relinquishing my hand, he paused; while I, startled by the depth of feeling in his tone, waited in silence.

'That is a secret forever hidden from youth.' His voice came to me out of the darkness with a note of melancholy and compassion. 'To your age life appears significant only in the present. It is when one nears the end of the journey that one recognizes that the pregnant moment was, if one may so express it, always in motion — producing a line that stretched interminably through happiness and sorrow; and that at no point did happiness become less desirable or sorrow easier to bear. One learnt patience, of course — lost enthusiasms a little, perhaps even hope. But one's sensations remained; and — amazingly — one's emotions. ... Had I been told at your age that the days as they passed would mean to me exactly as much twenty, thirty, even forty years later as they meant at that time, I should have thought — well,' he paused and drew a breath that ended in a sigh, 'I doubt if I should have thought at all of anything so remote and vague. But you' — he placed a hand on my shoulder, 'forgive me, I am speaking as an old man and as your friend — take care.... I have watched you, at first for the sake of one of those moments of the past — the most nearly perennial in its qualities of any in my life — and afterwards for your own sake. Beware of what I speak of: don't allow yourself to be hypnotized by the present — in your case of all others, precisely because it is not the sunshine of youth that has dazzled your eyes but its darkness.... And that, too, believe me, will pass — as inevitably as all the rest. It isn't even a question of rewards and punishments: it is just Life, whose joys and sadness alternate in our hearts, like day and night, winter and summer, about us, to the end of the chapter. For all we know the periodicity of the one may be as logical as that of the other — when we have the key. But, for the present, "sufficient unto the day" — you know the rest,' he swung open the gate. 'And remember — it's a long business. We all take wrong turnings: keep straight on now; and, whatever you do, never lose heart. Beyond some corner, perhaps where you least expect it, you'll find luck waiting'; his hand pressed mine again, 'be ready for your happiness. Good-bye. God bless you.'

The latch clicked behind me; out of the shadow of the trees I stepped into the vast illumination of the night.

CHAPTER IV

Mr. Bentinck was right: King George's Town was old-fashioned and rather charming. It had an air — familiar enough in European lands, but not readily to be expected so far afield as a British Colony — of having retired from active affairs into a modest and not undignified repose. And such, in fact, was its history. In the early half of last century it had been, first an outpost, then a center of up-country trade. Its ox-wagons, built by prosperous townsmen who had learned their craft in Scottish lowland smithies, creaked in hundreds out of its market square and over the rolling grass country to the north, bound for the kraals of the Transkei, Pondoland, and Tembuland; its smiling park-like distances had flickered with the glint of hostile assegais; and, under the gilded arms of William the Fourth, Governors had made peace in its dingy Court House.

But those days of mingled affluence and war had long since vanished. Railways and the rush to the diamond fields of Kimberley and the gold reefs of the Rand had shifted the focus of South African traffic and adventure. With the final pacification of the native territories and the centralization of authority the town and its nearer surroundings of veld and forest had merged into a Division of the Cape Colonial Administration.

At the date of my arrival, however, though somewhat somnolent under the increasing blaze of summer, it was far from moribund. Amid detonations like rifle shots from the enormous oxen-whips, its wagons still jolted and splashed through the river drift on their way to mysterious regions beyond the northern kloofs; farmers in wide-brimmed hats loafed on horseback outside the stores, discussing the prices of hides and mealies; and officers of the Cape Mounted Rifles, looking very smart in their heavily frogged dark-green tunics and forage caps, came and went between their quarters and the old verandahed buildings, festooned with flowering creepers, in the Military Reserve.

'Very English,' Mr. Bentinck had called it; and, compared with Cape Town and the western districts of the Colony, through which I had passed on my journey up-country, the place was noticeably free from Dutch influences. There was, indeed, an odd flavor of early Victorian days both about the houses and their inhabitants. From garden gates in secluded, leafy side-roads elderly ladies in bonnets, looking very like characters in *Cranford*, made their way on Sunday mornings to a porticoed church that might have tolled its rather cracked bell in any Regency suburb. And open doorways, framed in honeysuckle, afforded glimpses of interiors which preserved, in a slightly-faded guise perhaps, the genteel traditions of the early 'thirties across the world.

But it was English with a difference. Under the resplendent sunshine the beds of roses and pansies below lace-curtained windows assumed an exotic luxuriance; the neatly tended paths and borders might be enclosed, as likely as not, by a hedge of aloes or prickly pear; and the little old lady with her magenta ribbons and prayer book would, if occasion demanded, aim an authoritative prod with her parasol at some clay-smeared Fingo, marching (in double defiance of police regulations) completely naked on the footpath before her, his red blanket slung on the end of a knobkerrie.

In fact, the remaining adjective employed by my benefactor regarding my new home was the one which, from the first day there, recurred most frequently to my mind. In its wooded hollow, amid the boundless undulations of grassveld and mimosas, with the tropical-looking river flowing through its midst, and the gorgeous skies — that yet held in them a note of melancholy — overhead, the little town had an aspect of remoteness, singular and pervading. 'Out-of-the-world' was a group of words that fitted it best of all.

Yet the months that followed my arrival at King George's Town might be described as the most conventional of my existence. In them I had my first and only taste of 'Society.' My extremely modest status in the Government

Service would not, in itself, have introduced me to the exclusive circles in which I found a welcome (social relationships in the Colonies are by no means the simple and democratic affair that the newcomer is apt to imagine), and, needless to say, no initiative on my own part was responsible in the matter. Indeed I had done my best to avert the step that led to my brief prominence in up-country fashionable life.

During our last evening together Mr. Bentinck had mentioned that the Civil Commissioner of my prospective station, a Mr. Francis Carleton, was an old friend of his, who had served under my great-uncle, and had spoken of giving me a letter to him. Hurriedly and instinctively I had demurred. My host, after one of his meditative glances, refrained from pressing the point. But later, as I was saying good-bye, he had returned to it — merely remarking, without inviting my further views on the subject, that I had better leave the decision to him.

Even at the time I vaguely recognized that the proposal in question touched far-reaching issues concerning my future in the Colony. During the later weeks of my sentence one of the problems that had revolved endlessly in my brain through the solitary evenings in cell B 4/49 was whether I should, or should not, assume another name on my release. When the moment came to choose, an inhibition —

due partly to the apathy of which I have spoken, and still more to an obscure consciousness, not of innocence, certainly, but of something akin perhaps to injury — withheld me from taking a plunge that marks not only final disgrace, but, as it were, acquiescence.... Luckily my name is not an uncommon one (a fact for which I had good reason to be thankful, as few even of my relatives had identified me with the subject of the brief reports that appeared in the press at the time of my trial). But here in South Africa, where the map was dotted with places called after my great-uncle, the odds on my relationship to him remaining undiscovered were obviously slender. I suppose that my benefactor had thought it might be wiser for me to face the situation at once, rather than wait for the circumstance to leak out, accompanied — as would inevitably be the case in communities where well-connected ne'er-do-wells were always rife — by the inference that a youth so related would not have arrived unrecommended unless something were amiss.

At any rate a couple of mornings after I had reported for duty at the Public Works Department offices, I found the Civil Commissioner's card on my desk, together with a note from Mrs. Carleton inviting me to tea the next day. Evidently Mr. Bentinck had adhered to his intention. Uneasy as I felt at the prospect of such an ordeal, there was nothing for it but to accept.

The following afternoon, on arriving at the Residency — a large, rather gloomy house in the Military Reserve, surrounded by eucalyptus trees and tennis courts — I was ushered into a drawing-room congested, in the fashion of the previous decade, with plush-covered furniture and photograph frames. Presently my host came in and, shaking hands, asked me to sit down.

Mr. Carleton was my first experience of a Colonial of the upper class. Burly, erect, and sunburned, with imposing features and a long brown beard, he looked like an English country-gentleman who had somehow acquired an official air, together with manners that were elaborate enough to recall my childish memories of the Continent, rather than anything one is apt to encounter at home. But he was formidable, too, in a well-bred way; and, as he talked, a pair of imperious, bile-injected eyes surveyed me dispassionately. However, he was apparently a person accustomed to making up his mind; for, after a few minutes, his smile, which had been merely courteous, became friendly. With a word of excuse he left the room, returning — so promptly as to suggest that I had been put through a prearranged inspection — accompanied by his wife, a handsome, elderly lady, who greeted me kindly.

It says much for the reassuring influences which Mr. Bentinck had exercised on my jangled, oversensitive perceptions that I found myself able not merely to behave with composure during the visit, but — to my inward astonishment — to enjoy it. After all, I was young and, at the moment, under the spell of a new environment — of awakened hope. With these had emerged — as inevitably as shadows are cast when the sun comes out — a pursuing sense of loneliness. For the first time since I left school I was discovering a desire to make friends. The need for companionship, which during my solitary childhood found an outlet in my passion for Nanette, had been frustrated in the disaster at Eton, and nipped, as by frost, throughout the years of retribution and poverty that followed. With my crime, and in the polluted associations of 'The Scrubs,' I had thought it killed and — as one buries hastily and deep in an infected air — put away forever.

But the grave is admittedly a questionable symbol of finality; and even the most effectively interred emotions revive. I perceive now that my longing for human contacts had, when driven underground, germinated twenty-fold. Transplanted to a new and uncontaminated soil, at the first warmth of friendliness it had pushed to the surface and was already in blossom.

So, even the fact (which had been obvious enough) that my new acquaintances had received some inkling of my past, failed to intimidate me as it would have done a few weeks before. In one sense the mantle of Aunt Helen had fallen on Mr. Bentinck. The reliance I had placed on her in this alarming matter of introductory letters was now, at a like juncture, extended to him. And, precisely as happened in the former case, the circumstance that the recipient had reached an independent and apparently favorable verdict on me added greatly to my dawning confidence.

'We are always at home on Sunday afternoons,' Mrs. Carleton said, as I was taking my leave.

'If you've nothing better to do we shall expect you next Sunday,' added her husband in his affable Colonial voice — with a stare that unmistakably gave to the words the character of an order.

But, kindly as it was meant (I dare say Mr. Bentinck had described me as likely to be 'difficult' if faced with anything in the nature of an invitation), he need not have troubled to play the Commissioner just then. I was in a new mood — where excuses were far from my mind. As I stepped from the big, mahogany-furnished hall into the evening sunlight a feeling of mild exhilaration — more nearly approaching that of a normal socially inclined young man than any I had dreamed of — quickened my feet and started me whistling.

With the Residency doors thus opened to me I soon found plenty of scope for my budding gregariousness. There was a good deal of entertaining among the families of the civil servants, officers of the Colonial garrison and such professional and business people as happened to be included within the charmed ring of Military Reserve society. It was all on a very unpretentious scale, of course, but neither experience nor temperament were by way of making me critical. I joined the lawn tennis club, played cricket, and, with the aid of a pretty niece of the vicar's, quickly learned to dance the waltzes and polkas of the day.

I imagine it was very like any suburban or country-town life — but not quite. Tennis Clubs at Norwood or Balham have no leper 'location,' complete with mud huts and naked deformities, on the other side of their back walls; moonlight picnics from Seven-oaks — if and when they take place — don't have their baskets raided by baboons; nor, in an English dawn, is the returning dancer suddenly reminded of old *Graphic* pictures of native wars, by the silhouette of a Cape Mounted Rifle patrol riding through a kraal on the skyline above him.

In my then frame of mind such touches of the unfamiliar — trifling as they may sound — were invested with a private and auspicious significance. They were a part of the 'newness' with which, as with a subtle and intoxicating emanation of itself, Africa had greeted me across the moonlit water that night of arrival. In them, like the hero of the fairy-tale whose path was marked out for him by a succession of encounters with fabulous creatures, I found an assurance of being on the road to a Secret Country where, in some as yet inscrutable felicity, the guilt and expiation of the past would alike be wiped away....

In such a mood it is little to be wondered at if I espied romance even in my clerking. The local headquarters of the Public Works Department was fortunate enough to be housed in one of the old military offices on the Camp, or common, of the Reserve. Shaded by pepper trees the long two-storied building, with its doors giving on stone-flagged verandahs interlaced with bougainvillæa and clematis, had a quaint and rustic air. The bare, whitewashed rooms, opening one out of the other, showed a trace of Georgian spaciousness — unlooked-for and pleasant in these sub-tropical surroundings. Sitting at my baize-covered writing-desk — across which endless orderly processions of little red ants pursued their way in spite of my efforts to be rid of them — I had before me a widely opened window where lizards peeped and flashed in and out of the sunlight, or, once in a while, a chameleon, who lived among the creepers on that side of the house, would shoot his tongue at some disgusting, gorgeous horse-fly buzzing by the sill. In the way of business premises nothing could be more satisfyingly different from the dingy office in the Haymarket, with its pervading smell of stale liquor, where I had served my ill-omened apprenticeship.

My official associates, too, bore little resemblance to London clerks. Including the technical staff, there were about a dozen of us; and, from our chief, an ex-officer of the Admiralty Survey Department, down to our office-boy, an ex-trumpeter of the Cape Mounted Rifles, we were an oddly assorted crew. Between us — Britishers and Colonials — we seemed to have sailed as many seas as Captain Cook, helped to build railroads over half the world, fought in native wars I had scarcely heard of, and — so far as I could make out — been rather conspicuously unsuccessful in a number of less picturesque but equally diverse careers. There was even a Scotch baronet at the next table to me — inexplicably stranded and out of the picture, for, in contrast to some of his younger colleagues, he seemed a singularly unadventurous and respectable old gentleman.

On pay-days my duties took me afield to one or other of the road or bridge works under construction in the District. Accompanied by the clerk-of-works, and with my wages bags, filled with silver, tucked under the seat of the Cape-cart, I would bump over dusty tracks to lonely, sun-baked places where, like some colony of laborious insects, scores of naked black figures dug and hauled under the enormous blaze of the midday sky.

When the last of the sweating, acrid-smelling throng had been paid I usually wandered off alone. Shaded by a boulder or stunted bush, I would lie in the unique seclusion of the sunlit veld, smoking, keeping a languid lookout for puff adders, watching the koraans wheeling over my head, dozing, dreaming.... On the homeward journey, with the shadows of the vast undulations around us welling up under the evening light like the pools of an incoming tide, old Timms, the clerk-of-works, was apt to be amazed at my loquacity; and, as we rattled into the town past the Tennis Club, I would shout back greetings and chaff to my fellow-members with an intimate and comforting sensation of having traveled already some way toward reaching a place for myself in a thrilling, companionable world.

CHAPTER V

Then things went wrong. To this hour I cannot decide how it all began. It may have been merely an overheard remark — perhaps not about myself at all — that, in a phase of depression, set me wondering — doubting. For, although I was physically stronger than ever before, my nerves were unstable; the clouds of the past had a way, then inexplicable to me, of creeping into my brain at times when I felt most at peace. In those distant days most people — certainly all young people — were ignorant regarding the symptoms and incidence of neurasthenia; the very word was unknown to me until many years later. I now recognize that the dreaminess to which I had always been inclined made me peculiarly susceptible to the inroads of a malady that, as already remarked, is one of the most formidable developments of prison life. Vaguely, during my sentence, I had become conscious of the perils of 'thinking,' and had made a more or less sustained effort to concentrate on the task of the moment. But in the inexpressible relief of freedom this discipline had been relaxed; and now, amid the interests, diversions, and, above all, the hopes of my new surroundings, it had seemed the most natural thing in the world to drop back into my former habits. But the results were curiously uncertain. Sometimes, as on a trip such as I have described, all would go well. On other occasions — and especially in the early mornings — a train of thought which started in happiness was apt to lose itself in a maze of aimless and finally painful imaginings; and I would arrive at my work a prey to feelings of apprehension and insecurity which were no less disquieting because they appeared to be baseless. On any such day a chance word from a companion may have lodged in some reopened wound of memory the maggot of fear.

But although the initial cause of the particular bout of 'nerves' to which I refer is forgotten, a vivid enough recollection persists of the wretchedness which fell upon me during that week; the unapproachable misery of being constantly afraid — of terror lest all I had so lately gained, the friendliness, the priceless sense of naturalness in my relations with others, the dreams of an ultimate and mysterious recompense — lest all was to be snatched away by some whisper from the past. No doubt the mood that had so suddenly overwhelmed me would have lifted, and the buoyancy of youth (which through long repression had become, in my case, only too spontaneous) would have asserted itself. But on looking back to that interlude I cannot defend myself from the feeling that premonition was at work: I see cast across my path projections more ghostly than any conjured up by the mind of man — the shadows of coming events.

The first blow fell on a Saturday afternoon. I had been asked to make up a four at tennis, and although, in the uneasiness that had taken hold of me, I had begun to dread appearing at the club, I had agreed. Then, on my way to the courts, my misgivings got the upper hand; without in the least intending to break my appointment — merely to gain time, and with an excuse to myself that I had forgotten to lock away some pay-sheets on my desk — I turned off the path leading across the Reserve and made for the office. As I ran silently up the verandah steps (I was wearing my tennis shoes) the sound of voices came through the open window. Although it was a half-holiday, this did not surprise me, as the engineering staff were working overtime in connection with the plans for a bridge that had to be completed before the rainy season set in. Just as I reached the door I heard my name pronounced. The speaker's tones were loud and apparently argumentative; I recognized them at once as those of an assistant-engineer named Roberts, a noisy, rather second-rate fellow, who, on the strength of some official association of one of his relatives with my great-uncle, had been by way of striking up an intimacy with me.

'There you are,' he was saying, '"born 1875, educated Eton"' — he was evidently reading from some reference book. 'His father — let's see' — I heard a page being turned — 'his father's a younger son of the fifth earl. That makes him a first cousin to the present chap. Just as I said.' The bang of the book being shut reached me. 'You take my word for it — a young-fellow-my-lad who's a nephew of a Governor of the Colony and the first cousin of a lord doesn't turn up in a God-forsaken hole like this as a clerk in the P.W.D. unless he's been up to something. I haven't had a dozen years knocking about out here without coming across his sort! If you don't believe me — watch him. In spite of his side and guardee looks he's got a damned slinking way about him. Take my tip or leave it. I tell you I've seen his kind before; and if our young sprig of the nobility that all the girls are so keen about hasn't darned well done time I'll eat my hat!'

Some one behind the door burst out laughing. 'Oh, rot ——'

With a burning face I slipped down the steps and along a path that led to the open country beyond the Reserve.

As I hurried through an abandoned orange grove overgrown with cactus, and out on a slope from which the yellowing midsummer veld stretched on all sides to a far horizon, it seemed as though, from that verandah, I had stepped into another existence. A sudden appalling strangeness had fallen over the aspect of these familiar surroundings. I felt isolated, as a man is said to feel when he sees a ghost and the fellowship of material things drops away from him....

How long, in that confusion and distress, I stood or wandered there I do not know. I remember slowly becoming conscious of an ache in my hand, and of glancing down — I had my tennis racquet held in so convulsive a grip that the knuckles appeared about to burst through the skin. With a sort of astonishment I stared at the thing; already the life it represented seemed as remote as a dream. Automatically I gazed along the handle; within the oval of the frame I had a vision, as in a camera obscura, of the courts where, at that moment, I was doubtless being missed. I heard the chaff and laughter. With extraordinary clearness I followed the scene; saw the break-up of the sets, the leave-takings in the pavilion, the inevitable 'seeing-home' in couples.... The images changed — picnics, dances, starlit verandahs — it was like watching my lost life through a window. Suddenly I startled myself with a grim laugh — raising the racquet until the criss-cross of the gut made dark bars before my eyes against the sunlight. Yes — like looking through a well-remembered window....

Night had fallen, and the stars were high before I climbed on to the stoep of the little creeper-covered house where I lodged, and, noiselessly letting myself into my room, bolted the door behind me.

From that hour my new life crumbled. The brief run of luck in my game with Fate was checked; my gains of happiness and dreams (innocent enough in all conscience) melted, one by one, from beneath my hands. It may be thought that, for a young man of my experience of adversity, I showed an astonishing lack of fortitude in yielding so easily to panic; that a single remark — which, on reflection, would have exhibited itself for what it was — a bow drawn at a venture by an ill-bred and obviously antagonized companion — formed an absurdly inadequate basis for so complete a surrender. But the point I have tried to make clear is that the incident came at a juncture when I was incapable of taking a considered view. At the best of times I was handicapped in my relations with others by a conscience which, if not fairly to be termed bad, was certainly, in my own estimation, tainted — proverbially a poor equipment either for counsel or resistance. The fact that I am not naturally timid only made matters worse; my qualms revealed themselves in a peculiarly shameful and humiliating light, and were apt to produce storms of violent imaginings that did more, perhaps, than anything to confuse and frustrate my judgment.

When, therefore, in the midst of what might otherwise have been a passing phase of depression, the fears that had been gathering in my mind were confirmed by words which were at least explicit, I gave way to an alarm and dejection that affected my attitude toward all around me.

Perhaps if the shock had been a little longer delayed — if it had come when I had recovered the high spirits that were fast becoming natural to me — I should have made a firmer stand. But even then the odds would have been against me. In life, as in all conflicts, one must fight with the weapons at hand; and my armory of confidence was still too meager — my skill in its use too limited — to provide many resources in such a contingency.

For what it amounted to, however, it made the sense of defeat all the more bitter. Unconsciously, I had come to rely on its presence, and had, as at no former period of my career, given hostages to fortune. For youth has a terrible adaptability to happiness. Moreover, the sudden transition in recent weeks to the normal pleasures and interests of life had divested me of a valuable defense. I had lost the art — painfully acquired in that Kentish vicarage, in the loneliness of my Pimlico lodgings, amid the obscenities of the bakehouse squad at 'The Scrubs' — of merely existing.

So, in a predicament that was, in so large a measure, one of my own creation, I made a sad mess of things. It goes without saying that cause and effect wrapped their coils about me forthwith. My suspicions that others had heard, or might hear, some dreaded rumor made my temper with every one strained and defensive; and the more I had valued my relations with any particular person, inevitably — with him or her — the more 'difficult' I became. My friends and associates, being at this period (I am now convinced) without any key to my behavior, were not unnaturally puzzled and, finally, annoyed. In so small a community every one is conspicuous, and remarks began to be made, some of which reached my ears, and were promptly construed by me as proof that the threat which had terrified me more than anything in those overheard words was already in operation — that I was being watched.

It may be that if my earliest friends in King George's Town had been at hand matters might yet have been remedied. Whatever Mr. Bentinck had divulged to the Commissioner and his wife regarding my past, the decision which they had taken during my first call at the Residency had been adhered to; they had both been unvaryingly kind to me. In a marked degree Mr. Carleton was a person of experience, and of the detached and humane outlook which is apt to come with wide authority. If he had observed my behavior — and likely enough, sooner or later, it would have come to his notice — his special knowledge of the circumstances would have enabled him to make a shrewd guess at its cause; and, as my official superior — apart from any other relationship — he could have done more than any one else to bring me to my senses. Unmanageable as I may have been with others, I should have had to listen to anything which came from that quarter.

But it so happened that he and Mrs. Carleton had gone on two months' leave to Cape Town, and the Residency was deserted. Among my other seniors there was apparently no one who felt sufficiently interested, or who cared, perhaps, to tackle me on the subject. As is often the case with a naturally reserved youth, unhappiness had the effect of making me tongue-tied and 'wooden' — characteristics easy enough to confound with something less amiable; and I dare say my manners at this time may have been such as to keep even my best-disposed neighbors at a distance. Perhaps advances were made which I either did not see or misinterpreted. There were plenty of sensible, kindly people in the town; and, on looking back to those days, I am conscious that I may have repulsed well-meant efforts which, had they been met half-way, would not merely have saved me a vast deal of self-torture, but have cleared from before my feet the somber labyrinth of events that lay beyond.

One such incident there certainly was. I was returning on an evening a fortnight or so later from a long, aimless tramp over the veld paths that stretched on all sides beyond the town. The conflagration of the sunset had died down. Darkness was rising out of the hollows of the great space around, and a chilly breeze rustled among the mimosas, stirring the clouds of dust that hung in rose- and saffron-colored layers against the glow of the west. As I passed into the shadows of the tree-bordered road leading to the Reserve I heard a greeting, almost at my shoulder. With a painful start (for I was wrapped in a dull confusion of thoughts that had been pursuing me after a miserable day) I glanced round.

'Didn't you see me?' A figure on the sidewalk closed a gate, out of which she had apparently just stepped, and turned towards me. In the dusk I recognized one of the first of my new friends — the vicar's niece, who had taught me to dance.

'I'm afraid I didn't,' I stammered.

She moved slowly along the path. For some distance we walked in silence. I roused myself to make some remark about the weather, which met with no response. As we reached a corner of the road and came in sight of the church belfry silhouetted against the fading amethyst of the sky she paused, then quickened her pace.

'You don't seem to, now — ever,' she said.

'How do you mean?' I asked lamely.

'Notice — any of your friends.' She looked suddenly at me over her shoulder.

I made no answer. Self-centered and benumbed as I had become, I had vaguely foreseen during the past days the certainty of being met by some such words in circumstances where they could not be ignored. Now they had come, and from the person of all others on whose lips I dreaded most to hear that particular challenge. For my companion on this solitary, darkening road occupied a special and treasured place in my thoughts — she was the first girl friend I had ever known.

To people of normal upbringing the expression will probably evoke a juvenile and not very romantic image, and it will be almost impossible, even for those who have read thus far in my chronicle, to form an idea of the sense of discovery and exhilaration I had found in such a relationship. Sentiment entered very little, if at all, into it. To draw a line in these matters is difficult enough, but I doubt if, up to that time, my emotions had been roused to anything much warmer than the consciousness of a novel and delightful intimacy. Sex had played a singularly small part in my life hitherto. Even during the year in London — when, for the first time, its influences might have found scope to develop — I had been too lonely (and, within the limits available to me, too fastidious) to be in the way of acquiring that experience of female society, if of nothing more, with which most young men have grown up.

In such a situation as the present, therefore, I was more heavily handicapped than I knew. As a matter of fact, the feelings uppermost in my mind just then were those of a rather loutish embarrassment. At our last meeting, during a cricket match, about a week before, I had become involved in a dispute with some of the other players over the score. The affair was trifling, but owing, no doubt, to the effort I had forced myself to make to appear on the ground at all, my nerves got out of hand; it needed only a noisy intervention on the part of Roberts to rouse the ugly strain in my temper to which I have alluded. Even at the time I knew that my outburst was excessive and, from the point of view of manners, as ladies were present, inexcusable. Residency circles in King George's Town were apt to be very touchy over questions of deportment, and I was made to see that the incident — coming on the top of other recent lapses on my part—had produced a bad impression.

When the altercation ended (it was, in reality very brief) my present companion had moved across the pavilion to where I was standing and began talking of other matters. But by then I was already too much ashamed of myself to back up her kindly attempt to pass the situation off; and the fact that she had made herself more or less conspicuous on my behalf merely added to my discomfort at the moment, and resulted, when, later on, I started brooding over the affair, in my going out of my way to avoid her.

Now, as we neared the vicarage, I could find nothing to say. Few as her words had been, they amounted to a definite enough question; one that — ignoring my churlishness on the day of the match — went straight to the issue from which I shrank: the change in my behavior to those who, like herself, had been my friends. I had not the heart to seek refuge in argument. Her manner, even more than her words, invited a response which, circumstances being as they were, could only take the form of an explanation. And what was I to explain? As I stared between the tree-tops I wondered whether anywhere under the gathering splendor of the stars there walked another being so relentlessly pursued into silence.

When we reached the gate I stepped forward to open it; quickly she backed against the high plumbago hedge, her hand moved, almost touching my sleeve. 'Why — Why——'

I peered hastily into her face; in the pale beam of the lamp opposite the church I saw tears in her eyes — on her cheeks.

There are no words to measure the leap my heart took in that second. The night wheeled about me in shapes of amazement, bliss, and terror. I doubt if vanity had ever bulked large among the multitude of my faults; heaven knows it had had little enough to feed on. Life teaches no humility like that of an unwanted child, and in the ostracism and disgrace of later years I had shrunk from the flattering day-dreams of youth as from a mockery. Yet now, even to my incredulous eyes, there could be no mistaking the message of this glance from out of the shadows beside me. As I gazed, transfixed, it sought mine in a sudden concentration of regard — stirring the dusk between us, as with a whisper, questioning and tender.

I stood opposite her, dumb, trembling. Even after half a lifetime I cannot write of that moment. In my loneliness and longing I could have kissed the hem of her dress. Gratitude such as overwhelmed me then takes on the likeness of passion itself. Had it come in the sweetness of a happy hour it may well be that I (who knew so little of love) should have clasped the semblance to me, with all the world, alike of shame and honor, forgot. But amid my gloom the very violence of this awakening brought illumination. As when lightning reveals the night, I saw with a terrible and new remorse the chasm of my disgrace opening black between us, and myself standing by the brink with a heart empty of all save misery....

How much she read in my face I do not know. For an instant she made as if to speak — her hand fluttered towards me again. But she had seen enough. Quickly she bent her head. Without a sound she passed like a shadow through the gate into the darkness.

CHAPTER VI

THAT night marked a turning-point in my downward rush. It was as though a hand stretched out in succor had deflected my course to another and steeper declivity. But on that phase I would spare myself the pain of dwelling. Those moments by the vicarage gate have no sequel among the happenings of my story; my companion on that evening of starlight and shadows passed out of my life — or rather, to be accurate, I vanished from hers — as completely as had the boyish and unthinking happiness of which she had been so intimately a part; and the consequences — affecting as they did my whole outlook with a new and complex distress — are destined to reveal themselves only too clearly in the events that lie ahead.

But one result was immediate and disastrous. Amid the darker confusion into which I fell I lost touch more and more with any sense of proportion. The apprehensions which had already so distorted my social contacts twisted themselves into every circumstance of life; in the most casual event I detected a hidden thrust. Even to myself this attitude became increasingly obvious, but I had ceased to be able to control my thoughts. No matter from what source they sprang, sooner or later they swept into a stream which, as though at the mercy of some fault in its channel, began irresistibly to race and circle toward the vortex of my fears. Such a state of mind can have but one ending; before many days had passed it culminated in an incident that brought me to the last stage of my struggle.

On arriving at the office that particular morning, listless and on edge after a wretched awakening, I met the head of the accounting branch, my immediate superior, just outside. He nodded and, murmuring some remark about the heat, mounted the steps. As I followed he glanced over his shoulder. 'Oh, by the way, I've rearranged your duties. Take over from Vyner, will you?'

I paused with a foot on the top step. 'Vyner? Do you mean that he's to ——'

'Yes, I want you on the stores and distributions. He'll have the pay work for the future. Hand over this afternoon, will you?' He passed inside.

Instead of following I turned and stared dully across the Reserve, already shimmering in the heat haze. My first sensation was perhaps natural enough. Here, then, was another link with happiness gone.... My pay-day trips had been among the most enjoyable features of my new life. Now, it seemed, they too were done with. In future it would be Vyner who would set off in the mornings with old Timms, the clerk-of-works, bumping over the veld in the sunshine, while I was left to sweat at my desk.

In my then mood this sequence of ideas was peculiarly unfortunate. Nowhere had recent events played a more insidious part than in my official relations. Civil Service habits in King George's Town were of a much more sociable variety than anything I had known during my London apprenticeship; and the atmosphere of tobacco smoke, chaff, and general free-and-easiness which reigned in that old-fashioned, creeper-covered building had been an exhilarating element of my new environment. But, for what seemed ages to me now, I had sat down each morning at my ant-haunted desk with a sinking heart. Laughter and whispering take on a sinister note if one is forever suspecting that they are directed against oneself.

So the news that I was to be cooped up more closely than ever in surroundings which represented each day a greater ordeal, swept my thoughts forthwith into dreaded currents. I tried to stay their course, but the misgivings which always infested these morning hours had been early astir and, eddying to the surface, they now launched themselves on a flood that was already rushing beyond my control. I clutched the verandah rail on which I had been leaning. After all — it hadn't all been imagination! There was no getting away from the fact that Roberts ——

Suddenly, while I stared before me, my heart gave a jerk. As in a flash I remembered that Roberts had been talking to Grey (the chief accountant, who had just spoken to me) the afternoon before. In fact they had left the office together.

For a moment my brain seemed to stop working. Fragments of ideas flitted before me and vanished ere I could grasp their import. Roberts... Grey... With an effort I recaptured my thoughts. Roberts had been doing the talking — I recalled that clearly. About what?

Slowly the blood rose to my temples. Through a singing in my ears I heard his voice sounding from the open window behind me. 'Take my tip.... If he... hasn't darned well done time....'

Like the parts of a jig-saw puzzle the fragments slipped into place. Unconsciously my eyes traveled into the distance — along the office building, past the deserted orange grove to the slope beyond the Reserve. A well-remembered strangeness crept into the sunlight. Yes... that was it. Grey had taken the tip all right. 'Vyner will have the pay work for the future,' he had said. 'Hand over this afternoon.' And the sixth sense, discovered on the evening of my release, came into full action at last. Behind the memory of his glance as he had passed through the door, his thought unrolled itself like writing on the wall: 'The sooner the better. A young gaol-bird in charge of a couple of hundred pounds a week....'

That it was my own thought which had loomed as on a scroll before me, I not only see now — in the depths of my consciousness I knew it then. The fact of minor changes occurring in any office routine was too obvious not to reach me even at that moment. But it was whirled aside in the rush of my obsession. Like a swimmer among rapids, I had lost all grip on realities; buffeted and stunned, I felt only a last and crushing blow, and the waters of my shame closing over me....

And so I came — in a very real meaning of the words — to the beginning of the end. Amid the desolation of the past weeks the only refuge that had remained to me had been my work. From the day of my arrival I had taken my duties a good deal more seriously than was the fashion among the youths around me, at first from a desire to justify Mr. Bentinck's confidence; then, as time went on, because of a secret elation in filling, to the apparent satisfaction of my superiors, a post which, however modest, was at least one of trust. But there, in a case such as mine, had lurked a fatal danger — a blind spot in my most intimate outlook.

That I had lived in the shadow of a constant humiliation — that the fear of my past had haunted and broken me — all who have read thus far are aware. But, strange as it may seem, the conception of myself as a criminal — as one who, under any circumstances, could again lapse into dishonesty — had vanished from my mind. Whatever my proclivities in that direction may have been, they were long dead and buried — killed outright in the first hours in cell B 4/49. During the months that followed, by some mysterious process of compensation — or perhaps merely of self-protection (which enabled me to face the future at all) — even the specter of their existence had been laid; and the idea that I might be regarded by others as a potential menace to society had ceased to occur to me.

But somewhere in the depths of my subconsciousness — to employ the jargon of today — it must have been incessantly at work. With this death-blow to my self-esteem it exploded to the surface, hurling my fool's paradise in ruins about my feet, and leaving me on the brink of I knew not what.

On looking back to that interlude of chaos and anguish I cannot but be thankful that the end was not, in fact, to be long delayed.

A taste for a rather grim irony is so familiar an idiosyncrasy of fate that the circumstance which led to the final catastrophe of this period of my life seems peculiarly in character.

The gaol at King George's Town was situated midway between the Residency and the site of the old parade ground, now used as the Tennis Club. It was a small, repellent-looking building fronted by a massive arched gateway entirely out of scale with the main structure. The vegetation which had attached itself to most of the original masonry on the Reserve had been kept clear of its vicinity, and the place had, even on the brightest day, an habitual aspect of dusty gloom. Successive Inspectors of Prisons had condemned it as out-of-date and insecure (as well as shockingly insanitary), but there the matter had ended, and it continued to be tinkered at periodically by our Department. It is only fair to the authorities to say that the depressed-looking natives whom one saw being shepherded through the entrance seemed equally unlikely to take advantage of its disrepair or to object to its drains.

As a result of the recent Assize, however, accommodation had to be found in it for an inmate of another stamp, a colored man called Johannes, who had gained the reputation of being the only burglar up-country worthy of the name. In the usual course, as he had been sentenced to penal servitude, he should have been despatched forthwith to the Breakwater at Cape Town. But some delay had cropped up about his transfer, and he lingered on in his quarters in the Reserve; while Timms, our clerk-of-works, who, in virtue of his professional acquaintance with every gaol in the District was by way of being an amateur of local criminology, paid daily visits to our chief, prophesying evil. And before a week had passed his warnings were justified; Johannes made a hole in the roof, shinned over the outer wall, and vanished.

When the news of his escape leaked out there was something of a clamor in the town. Unlike more go-ahead parts of the Colony, the neighborhood was remarkably free from crime. Among the white population, save as a result of an occasional drunken brawl, offenses against the law were virtually unknown; and the 'red' Kaffirs in their scattered locations, although they had their own class of misdemeanors which were faithfully dealt with by the mounted police, were as a rule singularly honest. I have never lived in any town of the size where locks and fastenings were more generally disregarded. So the report that Johannes was again at large was received with much disfavor by all classes of the community.

It chanced that on the day following this occurrence one of the weekly tea-parties at the Tennis Club (given in rotation during the summer months by the lady members) was to take place. The hostess for the afternoon was a Mrs. Sterndale, the wife of the principal storekeeper in the town, who had always been particularly kind to me; and on this occasion she had gone out of her way to send a message asking me to make up one of the sets. I had not been at the club for over a fortnight and my immediate impulse was to find an excuse. But as I was in the act of writing a note I paused. In fairness to myself, I should explain that during the preceding weeks I had continued to make desperate, if spasmodic efforts to conquer my fears. But recently these had ceased. Suddenly I perceived that this invitation marked a parting of the ways; to shrink again would be to lose, not only what might well prove to be a last chance of retaining a place in the life around me, but the remnants of my self-respect. After a prolonged struggle I determined to go.

When the hour arrived, however, and the sounds of talk and laughter reached me from the pavilion as I crossed the road in front of the grounds, my courage failed me. But by then I was in full view of the courts; there was nothing for it but to go on.

Tea had begun already, and the stoep was crowded with members and guests. There seemed to be a larger gathering than usual; and as I made my way up the path from the gate the nervousness of a late arrival was added to my qualms.

Had I been less occupied with my discomfort I might have remembered that here, as elsewhere in the town, last night's escape was certain to have been the main topic of the conversation, and that the appearance on the scene of any member of the Public Works staff would inevitably be the signal for an outburst of questions and chaff. The fact that our Department was responsible for the upkeep of the gaol provided exactly the sort of opening that would appeal to a company mainly composed of officials belonging to other branches of the Government Service, for witticisms on the subject of the alleged facility with which Johannes had contrived his exit.

But at that moment I was conscious only of the ordeal of my solitary approach, and hastened up the steps with my mind a blank.

On reaching the top I paused by the railing and glanced round in search of my hostess. Just then an acquaintance named Henshaw, the chief clerk in the Civil Commissioner's office, who was lounging on a bench directly opposite, called out, 'Hullo!' and waved his racquet.

There was a sudden lull in the chatter; it seemed to me that all eyes turned in my direction.

'Here we are!' he cried. 'Here's the chap that knows all about prisons!'

Words are terrible things, incalculable and sinister — fraught with hidden powers of their own.

As I stood there in the stillness, I was curiously aware that the speaker had meant me no harm; there even fitted into its place at the back of my mind — for I knew him to be a thoroughly kindly fellow — the conviction that his sally had been intended to set me at ease — to bring me into the talk.

But I stood before him and them all as though turned to stone — petrified by the mere sound of these syllables... stunned by a form of words that released in my ears with appalling explicitness the impending threat which had hung for so many weeks in the very air about me. As on the pronouncement of an incantation, I was deprived of thought, of every human defense. I felt the veil drop from all that I had striven so despairingly to hide — from the hourly lie of my existence — from the craven thing in myself which was now revealing its terror that all might see.

For, as the moments passed, the long accumulated shame rose in waves until my cheeks and forehead burned in almost physical pain.

No speech could match the eloquence of that disclosure.... Then, just as I felt I could bear no more, the blood faded in my veins — seemed to die away in my heart, leaving me faint and dizzy. I put out a hand and caught at the verandah railing.

That broke the spell. The whipping of the flag overhead in the afternoon breeze, which had been deafening my ears, merged into a subdued rustle and scraping of chairs. For a spell had fallen on the company, too. Grant, the Assistant Resident Magistrate, broke into a strained laugh, 'Oh, shut up, Henshaw. Don't try to cart your responsibility on other people!' Henshaw responded by a lunge with his racquet; hastily and in disjointed sentences conversation began again, the groups broke up and every one started to move towards the steps at the end of the verandah leading down to the courts.

I bent and, with fumbling fingers, twitched at the knot of my shoelace. It was all I could do to retie it, for my eyes had suddenly filled with tears. My nerves had snapped at last.

When I lifted my head the stoep was deserted save for two colored maids clearing away the teacups. On the other side of the pavilion was a back entrance. I slipped through the empty dressing-room and out of the gate.

CHAPTER VII

In after years, when it became possible to review that scene, if not altogether dispassionately, at least with resignation, I have often asked myself how far it did enlighten, at the moment, those who witnessed it.

I shall never know the answer. Late as it may be in my narrative to admit the fact, I cannot even guess in what degree those present were prepared for any disclosure regarding my past. The terrors which had pursued me during the preceding weeks were real enough at the time, in all conscience; but for aught I can now tell to the contrary they may have been largely — perhaps wholly — of my own making.

That Roberts's words, overheard outside the office that Saturday afternoon, may have made an impression on those to whom they were addressed, and have been repeated, is possible enough. On the face of it they fitted into certain rather obvious peculiarities of my situation sufficiently closely to form a basis for the sort of gossip that was apt to attach itself in the Colony (not infrequently with some degree of foundation) to new arrivals from home; the 'gentleman scallywag' was a familiar figure up-country in those days. Moreover, the speaker belonged to the type of person who, once he has started a scandal, feels the necessity in the interests of verisimilitude, to embroider his statements. There is even the chance that he, or some one else, may have taken the trouble to make inquiries which resulted in eliciting more or less definite information about my antecedents.

But, while any or all of these contingencies may have been at work, I recognize, as I search my memories of that time, that apart from the inevitable effects of my own behavior I had none but the vaguest grounds for the misgivings which tortured me. What remains beyond doubt is that from the hour when these were so terrifyingly aroused, my conduct was of a nature not only to lend color to any rumor which might be current, but to focus on myself the very attention I so greatly dreaded. In such circumstances it would be no cause for surprise if speculation of one sort or another regarding my attitude had visited the minds of even the best-disposed of my acquaintances. And once having shrunk within the vicious circle of fear I became isolated from any possibility of learning the facts.

But although the immediate impression made on Mrs. Sterndale and her guests by my collapse remains an enigma, there was to be no uncertainty regarding its results — my secret was out before the party was over.

Even at the time I knew that it must be so. In the light of that lamentably dramatic performance (both in setting and quality it hideously resembled a dénouement of the stage) it is impossible to conceive of words more instinct with illumination than those of Henshaw's well-meant greeting. During the ensuing outburst of talk — I felt it released behind me like a sluice as I fled from the spot — the last degree of their significance would be canvassed; and with even the dullest and most kindly of my friends I had only too effectually prepared the way for the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from their shattering effect. No doubt, too, once the clue was supplied, there would be many to affirm that they had always suspected something of the kind; Roberts did not happen to be present that afternoon, but, human nature being as it is, I dare say others would be found among the groups whispering on the benches round the courts, who had noticed that I had had 'a damned slinking way' about me....

Not that any one was unkind. On the whole — when the unavoidable meetings occurred next day and thereafter — people were very decent. During the hours spent sitting on the edge of the bed in my stifling little room that night I had thought the prospect before me to be definitely unbearable. My first emotion as I had hastened up the side-path behind the tennis grounds was of escape — a vehement longing to flee over the open veld until I dropped. Then, as I turned the corner into the Reserve road an intense languor overcame me. It was, I suppose, largely physical — a reaction produced by shock after the strain of the past weeks. An ache — as of fingers gripping the base of my skull — of which I had lately been dimly conscious, increased to a formidable pressure that exhausted me, even as I picked my way irresolutely across the common in the direction of my lodgings. Disquieting as it afterwards became, there was a measure of relief in the pain; it made thinking difficult and inexplicably fatiguing. Long before darkness and the hot oppression of the night crept into the room I dozed off where I sat, to start up time and again with my heart pounding in my breast at some spasm of subconscious horror of the morrow. Feverishly during the intervals of wakefulness I counted and re-counted the coins in my pocket; there was no hope to be found there. Only a few shillings of my month's pay remained; and in those days King George's Town was separated by a long and costly journey from any place where I could seek oblivion and a chance to begin life once more. . . .

With the morning the lethargy which had fallen on both mind and body was so increased that my one recollection is of the seemingly endless effort of dressing. As a consequence I arrived late at the office, and suffered a ghastly recurrence of 'nerves' on entering the room and making for my desk. But it passed with curious suddenness; if any rumor of the previous afternoon's affair had reached my companions they betrayed no sign either in look or word; and, after Grey had given me an instruction in his normally reserved manner, I relapsed straightway into a listlessness from which I found extreme difficulty in rousing myself sufficiently to concentrate on my work.

A like experience marked my first encounters outside — moments of suffocating agitation at the approach of anybody I knew; and then, after the customary greetings had been exchanged, an instant's acute relief dying away in a dull confusion of lassitude and pain.

So it came about that, partly owing to my state and partly because, as I have said, people behaved very well, I never knew, with any sort of exactitude, when the story of my wretched self-exposure filtered through the various strata of my neighbors. In the nature of things such a process would call for some nicety of observation on the part of the beholder; and my perceptions had been deadened as by a blow. Of one indication, however, I became gradually aware; civil and not unkindly as were the nods I received in passing, no one, ere the week was over, ever again stopped to exchange a word....

That, too, may have been considerately meant. As I look back on the circumstances, and on the place where these things happened, I recognize that the isolation to which I found myself thenceforth consigned held in it a somewhat different significance to any that would have obtained elsewhere. It did not imply ostracism so much as an acceptance of the fact that, in a measure on my own initiative (for my behavior during the previous weeks must, in fairness, be remembered), I had stepped out of the social life of the town into a world which was none the less familiar to the inhabitants because it was seldom referred to.

I have pictured King George's Town as old-fashioned and secluded, but it was something more; it had about it an air of its own extremely difficult to convey in writing, but which may perhaps be indicated by the word latency. Small as it was (the white population numbered less than five thousand) a newcomer like myself never seemed to arrive at any complete acquaintance with either its physical or human aspects. Built in a hollow, on two banks of a river, its streets and roads conformed to no regular plan. Many were steep and narrow, a few wide out of all proportion to their structures; some meandered down to the tropical-looking rushes and pools of the waterfront, others ended abruptly on the edge of dusty slopes where little squalid houses — which, but for their stoeps and corrugated-iron roofs, might have been plucked from the outskirts of any English country town — looked over an immense African view of veld and sky, with only the smoke of distant kraals between them and the horizon.

Perhaps it was merely because so many of the thoroughfares led nowhere in particular that one got the impression of unexplored corners; but even after some months of residence in the place I used to find myself confronted with new glimpses and turnings — vaguely surprised by chancing upon enigmatic quarters, that seemed to have little relation to any section of the community of which I was aware. No doubt all localities which have seen better days are apt to exhibit such features; and in the older districts it was fairly obvious that these rambling, substantial buildings (unlike most up-country stations King George's Town was constructed of stone) had been abandoned to the class which, in a native colony, hovers on the border-line of 'color.'

But it was not only in the weed-grown streets by the river that the unfamiliar had a way of slipping into notice. Amid the luxuriant vegetation of the Reserve deserted side-paths vanished between hedges of cactus, behind which, on a still evening, one would see smoke rising from hidden and hitherto unsuspected roofs; or it might be that while walking in a friend's garden one would catch one's first sight of some rose-covered dwelling screened from every other angle of view by its encircling greenery.

In trying to express the quality to which I have referred it is easy to exaggerate; and, as a matter of fact, I doubt if I should have given more than a passing thought to those sequestered abodes were it not that gradually I had become aware that some at least were inhabited by people who seemed to lead an existence curiously apart from the life of the place. Behind the lofty aloe hedges one heard voices whose owners I, certainly, never set eyes on during the whole of my stay; and there were other individuals and families only a degree less aloof. These one might encounter on the roads or in shops, and among them were some — elderly ladies for the most part — who were to be seen at church. But on no occasion that I knew of did members of such households appear to mingle in the social affairs around them, and although in several instances they were on bowing terms with the older residents, perhaps even with the Commissioner and his wife, one never met them in the houses of one's friends.

I may confess at once that the mystery — if indeed it could be said to amount to anything of the kind—which surrounded these dwellings and their occupants has remained a closed book to me. My sojourn in King George's Town was too brief and itself too detached to afford opportunities for acquiring any insight below the surface of local relationships. But by one channel or another remarks did come to my ears that may have had a bearing on the matter. I fancy that Colonial life — and especially that of relatively old settlements like the Eastern Districts of the Cape — had a way of following the example of nature in those parts, and of investing its social standards and ethics with protective shades of their own. Indeed, even its laws assisted the process; over a large portion of South Africa the possession of an uncut diamond, however innocently come by, used in my day to be fraught with penalties scarcely less dire than attend elsewhere the deadliest of crimes. In territories where blacks outnumbered the colonist by a hundred to one, and where native wars had been endemic for a couple of centuries, the gunrunner was regarded in a different light from that in which he figures in the pages of fiction. And behind the law lurked codes of conduct hastily assembled long ago in the stress of frontier existence, to offend against which was to be marked — oneself and one's kin — to the second or third generation.

How far the owners of those retired homes may have been affected by any such blots on their escutcheons; or whether more familiar irregularities, or merely the omnipresent complication of 'color,' had crept between them and their neighbors is, as I have said, beyond my knowledge. But there they were, inconspicuous and apart, dwelling amid the shade of their verdant retreats, flitting, themselves like shadows, across the gorgeous sunshine which, as the African summer waxed, lay like a blight upon the little town in its hollow on the veld.

Into that domain of obscurity I passed, as it were, in a night. Unlike some other regions of human twilight, it was a place of silence; one had fellows but no companions. And among the living one came and went like a ghost. Yet, there in the gloom, she whom I have named the veiled sister of destiny awaited me.

CHAPTER VIII

It is generally assumed that all existences, material and spiritual alike, lie under laws of some kind. The life I now entered upon formed no exception; and in it, as elsewhere, one arrived at the scope of its rules by discovering what one could not do.

Of these restrictions the first seemed to be the impossibility of continuing to live under the same roof with those who belonged to the world one had left. There must have been what is called in the East a 'strong magic' about that particular edict. The little ramshackle house in its garden overgrown with arum lilies and geraniums where I had lodged since my arrival was certainly without any pretensions, social or otherwise; it had rather the aspect of being itself on the fringe of Military Reserve respectability. Yet within twenty-four hours of the events I have described I found my feet turning towards those ambiguous quarters by the river-front, and anxiously exploring hidden possibilities around the corners of unfrequented side-paths.

The truth is, of course, that when human relations get out of gear it is in one's immediate surroundings that the first and perhaps least bearable strain is felt. People with whom one sits day after day at meals and who occupy rooms on the same passage, although they may not be friends, are something more than neighbors. It was not that I troubled about what the two young Colonial clerks who were my fellow-boarders might hear or think of me — I had grown too apathetic to care. But I was suddenly consumed by a sense of responsibility in the matter. It seemed to me, as I sat on my bed dully thinking it over, that while, if one were expected to go on living at all, one might perhaps have the right to cling to the day's work as long as possible — and consequently to rub shoulders with the other fellows at the office — common decency precluded the idea of continuing to expose a couple of respectable youths to the unpleasantness of discovering that they were eating out of the same dish and sharing a sitting-room with an ex-thief. Of course they could take themselves off elsewhere. But then there was Mother Mounsey, as we called our landlady — who, by the way, ate with us — to be considered. Lodgers were none too easily come by in King George's Town; why should she be made to suffer on my behalf? Moreover, as the widow of an officer in the Cape Mounted Rifles, she retained a precarious footing on the outskirts of Reserve society and was sure to hear, sooner or later, any gossip that might be afoot. She was rather a hard-bitten old lady, with whom respectability amounted to a fetish. It needed little further reflection to assure me that my compunctions regarding the young men on the other side of the partitions were wasted; it would be I who would have to go.

The question was — where? The local hotel was totally beyond my means; to move to any of the other places where I knew boarders were taken would be merely to foist my presence on some equally blameless household. After two or three evenings spent in random and abortive inquiries in the less reputable districts of the town the problem seemed to be no nearer solution.

Then Chance intervened, and in a shape no less august than orders from the Minister of Railways and Public Works.

It happened that the Departmental vote for the current financial year had included funds for the building of Government warehouses and Customs offices at Port Caroline, the seaport of the King George's Town District. Instructions had recently been received that work was to be started at the close of the hot weather; and as the operations authorized formed part of a larger scheme likely to occupy some years, certain members of the architectural staff attached to District headquarters were under notice to proceed to Port Caroline, where they were to be settled more or less permanently. Orders now arrived that two of the draughtsmen were to leave forthwith to make the necessary preparations on the spot; and a couple of days later their office on the first floor of our building was dismantled.

These upstairs rooms were very pleasant. They had been designed as officers' quarters in the old days when British troops were stationed in the town, and their proportions and fittings did credit to the craftsmanship of the Royal Engineers of the time. Like our office below they opened on a wide stone-flagged verandah, and as they stretched the whole breadth of the building they were spacious apartments, with windows that commanded a fine view over the trees to the open veld beyond.

The room which had become vacant was situated at the end of the block, and had an additional window on the far wall giving upon the deserted orange grove that rose in masses of somber green up the slope overlooking the Reserve.

The idea that I should apply for the use of it as quarters originated in the friendly but salacious mind of old Timms, the clerk-of-works. In his own line, Timms was an excellent public servant, who had been over thirty years in the Department; but outside office hours his habits were irregular. How he had contrived to establish a reputation as a Don Juan which not merely extended to every station in the District but was always on the point of simmering into a more or less official scandal was a mystery that was apt to add materially to the exasperation of his superiors. Beyond all odds he was the ugliest human being I have ever encountered. His sun-blackened, warty face, variegated by a pronounced hare-lip and silky mouse-colored tufts of beard, reminded me of nothing so much as a battered gargoyle. But he was a genial old ruffian, with a vast store of information about up-country life, and in the course of our pay-day trips together I had acquired a liking for him which appeared to be mutual. Whereabouts in the town he maintained his equivocal establishment I have no idea, but through some channel or other he had heard of my surreptitious inquiries for accommodation, and had leapt to the inference that my desire to abandon the respectability of the Military Reserve must be dictated by the budding of tastes congenial to his own. This inspired him with a spirit of helpfulness which might have proved highly embarrassing, but for the fact that almost the first possibility which occurred to him in the matter was the dismantled room at the office.

It seemed that there were precedents — an important point when official sanction had to be obtained — for the idea. At various times in the past one or other of these quarters had been occupied by members of our staff. Indeed a room adjacent to the one now vacant had been rented by a clerk named Jenkins about a year previously. Like myself, he had sought refuge from a Reserve boarding-house, but in his case the reason had been far from commending itself to Mr. Timms.

'He was one of the hymn-singin' lot,' explained my ally. 'Not much better than a missionary, he wasn't. Used to have nigger Sunday School in his bedroom at Mrs. Wallop's, and evenin' classes, till he stank the place out, and she had enough of it. Then he got round the chief and moved to the room above your office; and after that you'd see "six little nigger boys sitting in a row," as the song says — only there were nearer twenty than six — all along of the top verandah almost before the staff had their backs turned. Regular scandal.' He snorted disgustedly. 'Place needs jollyin' up a bit after that lot! You come along up and have a look at it.'

The vision of myself as a tenant likely to enliven these or any other premises was sufficiently grim to bring a smile to my lips, which Timms obviously took for approval; as he marched off before me he produced a voluminous notebook.

'It didn't ought to cost you a tickey,' he continued, pausing on the stairs, ''cept for the ten bob a month they charged Jenkins. There's everything you want down at the stores, and them stretchers and blankets and washstands'll be all the better for being looked after.' He began scribbling a list. As stores clerk I knew this to be true enough; there were always spare sets of camp equipment on my books that suffered from warping and the inroads of ants when they were not in use.

With this in my mind any doubts I may have had regarding Timms's suggestion vanished, as we surveyed the room. Even after thirty years its aspect that evening (our inspection was being made after office hours) remains in my memory with singular vividness. It seems to me now that as I crossed the threshold the spell of an inscrutable but seductive welcome was cast about me.

The workmen had already removed the shelves and other traces of the draughtsmen's occupation, and the walls had been scrubbed down and given a coat of whitewash. Through the widely opened door the late sun flooded the interior with a golden, snowy radiance, amid which tall Victorian windows framed views of acacias and pepper trees waving in the afternoon wind against the melancholy verdure of the slope above. An air of sylvan privacy lay upon the place; as I stepped out on the verandah the silent façade of the building stretched behind me, as of some conventual settlement on the edge of a sub-tropical forest.

'Bit of all right, ain't it?' inquired Timms. He leered encouragingly towards an outside staircase that descended opposite the doorway of the room to the path below. 'You won't have no Mrs. Mounsey to interfere with you here!'

I nodded. In my relief at having been led to so unexpected a haven I had temporarily forgotten the disreputable enthusiasms of my guide. As we retraced our steps I decided to seek the chief's permission regarding the quarters at the first possible moment the following morning.

This was a project that might require some maneuvering. Mr. Brand, the District Inspector of Public Works, was a difficult person to approach. It was not that he was overbearing or even brusque — quite the reverse. The reluctance felt by his subordinates to entering his room was due to his polite but extremely obvious distaste for their presence — and, apparently, for the society of any of his fellow-creatures. The only emotion he was ever known to exhibit was an almost passionate desire to be left alone. When one opened his door he would cast over his shoulder a near-sighted, anguished glance; and thereafter he fidgeted and stared out of the window or on the floor, rustling his papers and murmuring such answers or instructions as were unavoidable (he was said to groan aloud if the interview were protracted) until he got rid of one. In these respects anybody less like the ordinary idea of an ex-naval officer it would be impossible to imagine, but both in his habits and appearance he retained certain nautical characteristics. He was a strict disciplinarian; his shyness — if that is the right word for it — had no relation either to timidity or slackness, and the Public Works contractors and rougher members of his outdoor staff knew better than to take liberties with him. Although still in early middle age he preserved the thick mutton-chop whiskers fashionable at sea in a former generation; and at all seasons he dressed in a neatly buttoned double-breasted suit of blue serge. One of his oddest traits was an intense dislike to being seen wearing the spectacles he had to use when reading or writing; on being approached while at work he would snatch them from his nose and blink until he had extracted, and fixed in the appropriate eye, one or other of the single glasses which he carried in the breast pockets of his jacket. Occasionally, when compelled to examine something out of doors, he employed both monocles simultaneously — presenting at such moments a very curious, owl-like appearance.

I was fortunate in catching him next day before he had settled down at his desk, thus eliminating the slight irritation he always displayed while effecting the quick-change just described. He was cleaning his pipe and stared at me benevolently between operations with a feather. As a matter of fact, he had been very nice on the few occasions when I had been brought in contact with him. But this was an anxious moment. Ever since the scene at the Tennis Club I had been haunted by the notion that if the facts of my past became known, as it were officially, my services in the Department might be dispensed with. Apart from any other motive one of the reasons which had decided me to apply for the vacant quarters was a desire to be rid of this uncertainty — to know, one way or the other, how I stood. It seemed obvious that if my dismissal were under consideration such a request on my part must bring matters to a head; so I awaited Mr. Brand's reply with a catch in my breath.

I could glean nothing from his manner. He dropped a couple of soiled feathers into the fireplace and glanced out of the window; then his myopic brown eyes turned on me with unexpected directness.

'You'd find it a bit lonely,' he nodded up at the ceiling towards the distant room.

'Oh, I want that,' I rejoined involuntarily.

He stared before him meditatively.

'All right being alone if you don't have to be,' he pronounced.

I thought for an instant that he was merely making some observation regarding a point of view with the intricacies of which he, of all people, could claim to be familiar. But a second glance undeceived me. As with many heavy men, his features were capable of unexpected powers of expression. I knew suddenly that something concerning me had reached his ears. With a sort of fatalistic curiosity I listened for what was coming.

But Mr. Brand was the least conversational of beings. He moved to his chair. 'All right,' he said.

Between the mingled influences of surprise and uncertainty I remained standing where I was.

'All right,' he repeated impatiently. 'Tell the clerk-of-works to fix it up.'

I cut my thanks as short as possible and made for the door; then he startled me by emitting a sound that had a bizarre effect of some strangulated feeling about it.

'Watch out, though,' he grunted. 'Loneliness... plays Old Harry with fellows.'

Amid my relief I experienced an instant's enlightenment as I slipped out and turned the handle behind me; I felt that I had nothing to fear from any intervention on the part of Mr. Brand; at some point in his varied and rather mysterious career he had learned to leave life to the working of its own doom in the hearts of his fellow-men.

That afternoon I gave Mrs. Mounsey notice of my intended departure. Only the day before I had become aware of a change in her manner; now she listened in silence, but with pursed lips and a gleam in her eyes which warned me that my new arrangements had been completed none too soon.

So by the close of the month I found myself, in a curiously final sense, one of the little company of recluses who came and went about their affairs amid the verdant shadows of the Reserve.

Thenceforth, my isolation, if not as complete as that of some others, became during the major portion of the twenty-four hours perhaps the most accentuated of any. There is no solitude so profound as that which falls on an office building when the day's work is over. About even the most deserted of dwelling-houses there cling the echoes of some period of consecutive life, when its walls have enclosed, not alone the affairs, but the solaces, passions, and dreams of human existence. But the rooms and corridors of a business office have no memories after nightfall. They are haunted not by ghosts but by a pervading emptiness that is apt to infect the imagination with misgivings of its own. As I returned from my lonely evening walks the rows of blank windows revealed glimpses of interiors become unaccountably changed amid the shadows of the dusk. During the long hours of darkness the building lay below me as lifeless as a vault; in the sudden pauses that arrest the clamor of a southern night, its silence seemed to creep like a presence from room to room and to hover on the stairs.

The only human shape which invaded my nightly seclusion was that of Baluka, the Zulu messenger of the Department, who had taken over, unofficially, the duties of my batman. His enormous form came and went at hours of his own choosing, gliding mysteriously on to the tree-bordered path below, noiseless and almost as black as the shadows from which he emerged. As in the matter of my quarters, I owed his attentions to the fertile brain of old Timms. Before moving into the room it had been necessary to find some one to keep the place in order and carry water for my bath. If left to myself, the idea of summoning Baluka to my aid would have been long of occurring to me; in such a connection I should have thought almost as soon of trying to raise the devil.

To those who did not know South Africa thirty or more years ago it is difficult to convey an impression of his appearance or personality. He was an old man even then, and already a survival of an almost extinct type — the flower of the Bantu military manhood, bred in the traditions of Dingiswayo and Chaka. Even as a product of that terrible forcing-house for warriors where, during three generations, the unfit of the nation were butchered and none but the fiercest permitted to breed, he must have been exceptional; certainly when judged by any other standards he was to an extraordinary degree imposing and formidable. I never knew his exact height, but he towered a good half-dozen inches above my head, and I stand well over six feet in my shoes. Save for his immense shoulders and chest he was unusually slender for a man of his years, and he carried himself with the poise of a fencing-master. According to Timms his Zulu name ('Baluka' he had merely inherited from his predecessor on the office pay-roll) signified 'The Quivering

Assegai.' African natives have a genius for hitting upon descriptive appellations, and it would be impossible to find words more strikingly to indicate the spring and grace of his movements. Muscularly he was in a class by himself; I have seen him, when lending a hand at the Ordnance Stores, hoist one end of an ammunition case while three European privates strained at the other. His brownish-black face, surmounted by crisp woolly gray hair, was negroid and repulsive, but it had a look of ferocious patience that gave it dignity. In no other human eyes have I seen fixed so supercilious a gaze. I imagine that, in a community where 'airs' on the part of any Kaffir met with short shrift, only its unvarying quality — like the very similar stare of certain wild beasts in captivity — had protected him; a regard so permanent comes to be accepted as a feature rather than an expression. He was extremely taciturn, but biddable and, within limits, intelligent. Clad in a dark blue jacket with brightly polished metal buttons (he was scrupulously clean in his person) and pants reaching to his bare knees, he stalked on his errands from office to office wrapped in a forbidding and melancholy abstraction.

From the day of my arrival he had been a source of vaguely romantic speculation to me. When I was pay-clerk he accompanied my visits to the bank in order to carry the heavy bags of silver, marching behind me in the gutter with an air of grim humility which I found rather embarrassing.

The idea of such a person attending to my domestic needs was, when proposed by Timms, merely startling.

'It'll be all right,' said the latter, leaning over me confidentially (I was finishing some work at the office). 'I've just had a talk with him. He wouldn't do it for any of the rest of them here, but he's taken some sort of a fancy to you. Niggers are like that. Says your father must be an "Induna" — a noble. That's right, ain't it?'

I shook my head. I didn't feel inclined to embark on an explanation regarding the status of a younger son in relation to a Zulu point of view.

Timms was disbelieving. 'Well, people say he's a lord, or something of the kind. Anyway, it don't matter. Baluka won't have heard any of that; he's made up his own mind about you. He's an Induna himself, so he ought to know. Niggers that are swells like he is don't make no mistakes about that sort of thing. He was one of Cetewayo's generals before we smashed them up. He don't ever speak of it himself, but when Sir Theophilus Shepstone was here on a visit years ago he recognized him straight off and had a talk with him.'

'But I want a servant,' I objected, 'not a general.'

My companion grinned. 'There you are!

That shows Baluka's right. If you came from Clapham or Hammersmith, like most of the rest of them here, the only kind of a servant you'd know about would be a "general"! Never mind,' he continued amiably (I suppose I looked mystified), 'that's just a bit of a joke. Baluka'll suit all right. There ain't anything about sweeping and dusting he hasn't learned, looking after these rooms in the office the last dozen years. And he's as neat as a new pin himself. Knows a good bit of Dutch, and a word or two of English, too, so you'll get on A 1. He'll do it for half-a-crown a week. Apart from him takin' a fancy to you he'll be glad of the money. He's saving up to go back to Natal — got one of his wives there that he hasn't seen for twenty years. He's just outside, I'll give him a shout.'

A moment later the doorway darkened and Baluka advanced towards the window; with the green glow of the evening sky on his face he presented a more than usually satanic aspect.

Timms explained volubly (he had an uncanny gift for languages), while the other listened with his habitual air of combined obedience and disdain. At the close he turned to me; from his protruding, horny lips issued a deep murmur, his right arm rose in a gesture, unfamiliar and impressive.

'Cripes!' exclaimed my companion, as the Zulu marched from the room. 'See that?

That was his military salute. He don't do it more'n once in a blue moon.' He moved to the door. 'Come to think of it, it's a bit of a lark you havin' Baluka for your skivvy!' He wiped his brow and put on his hat. 'Why, d'you know, that old geezer's killed hundreds and hundreds of people, thousands, I dare say—slashed them open with his assegai. Women and children, too! I know things that would make your hair stand on end about him.' Timms glanced back from the threshold, his hare-lip drawn up on his teeth in a horrifying grimace.

As the summer nights grew hotter the hours of my loneliness lengthened. Relatively airy as these new quarters were, I dreaded going indoors. On my return from the rather disreputable inn (it was nothing more than a bar with a kitchen and dining-room attached) on the outskirts of the Reserve where I took my evening meal, I would pull a camp-chair out on the verandah and, with my feet on the railing, lie listening to the shrill uproar that poured from every tree and bush, to the distant booming of the frogs by the river, and, as it were, to the endless jolting and creaking of my own thoughts.

In what I have written of the torpor that fell upon me after the shock of my final downfall I may have given the impression that I had passed into a phase of quiescence which though not, assuredly, one of peace, was at least a reprieve from the anxieties and terrors that had beset me. In a measure such was the case. But if, to the reader, the word reprieve connotes any sense of relief, no expression could be more misleading.

For, with the enchantment and passion of life scarce yet awakened in my heart, I had plunged to the depths of human misfortune — I had reached despair.

Youth — at least such a youth as I then was — is without the habit of consecutive reasoning. Existence comes in a series of impressions, vivid and cumulative in result, but which at the time form no connected experience. The impact of its joys, excitements, and rebuffs falls upon most young people like that of the waves of a sunlit sea on the face of a swimmer striking out hither and thither with little thought save for the sport of the moment. But such a state of mind predicates fine or, at least, moderate weather. To confront with exhilaration or even composure the billows of winter and storm demands a trained endurance.

In life those who keep afloat at all acquire something of the kind. With the bulk of us it takes the guise of a more or less conscious philosophy. We learn, as we say, to accept things as they come; we may even arrive at some flattering vision of an underlying scheme which will justify so relentless a discipline.

But in my case the stress had come too soon. I had been exposed to the onslaught of the breakers before I had learned that their crashing and seemingly purposeless blows were inherent to the tide and flux of an ocean on which, in the nature of things, the sun would yet shine and calm reign. I was worn out by struggles beyond my powers and was now derelict — kept from foundering only by the buoyancy, not of hope, but of the tragic vitality of youth. Constantly during that time my thoughts turned on death; the gun Mr. Bentinck had given me, my razor, even the tin of poison with which Baluka waged war on the rats that infested the building: night after night I had paced my room with one or other in my hand. But at such crises the will is fortified or made impotent, as the case may be, by some mysterious trend in the deeps of one's personality. Of this fact I had then no inkling; and it was with an added hopelessness that I gradually discovered that another, and, as it seemed to me at the time, the most manly way of escape was barred.

On a night of dazzling moonlight I was lying back in my chair; my eyes, wearied by the white brilliance that poured upon the tree-tops around, were closed. The clock of the public buildings had just struck twelve, the chime dying in an oppressive quiet. So sultry was the air that even the cicadas flagged, their crescendos dwindling into ever lengthening pauses; the roar of the frogs by the river had languished to a scarcely audible throb.

From below my feet I heard the crack of a branch; opening my eyes, I glanced down between the iron rails.

Against the trunk of a withered orange tree, less than twenty yards up the slope, was leaning the figure of a girl.

CHAPTER IX

Cautiously I sat forward. I had been dozing and was still incompletely awake. Amid the downpour of light, silence, and lateness of the hour the apparition produced an overmastering effect of unreality. As the moments passed I had the hallucination of the surrounding trees having shifted closer, and of this figure and myself on my creeper-hung balcony, awaiting, like duettists against their background of theatrically vivid blacks and greens, a mysterious cue in some rehearsal before the glittering emptiness of the night. So strong was the impression of an opening pause that at the creak of my chair I held my breath and sank back into the darkness under the verandah roof.

Whether at the sound, or by chance, I could not tell, but she changed her position, and in the moonbeam that struck through the desiccated foliage above I saw her face. The confusion of awakening still clung about me; as when one emerges from a dream, I wrestled with the sense of something forgotten, yet familiar — in this case the suggestion of a likeness infinitely removed in time and space; then suddenly I remembered. Below me, at the angle from which I watched, her forehead, the line of her eyebrows, the curve of her chin brought to my mind the central figure of a picture which hung in the gallery of my Berkshire home — a replica (for as such it was authoritatively regarded) of Tintoretto's 'Birth of the Milky Way.' As a child I had nourished a secret passion for that beautiful and incomprehensibly situated lady.

But while I gazed, the resemblance faded. This face in the moonlight might almost have been that of a daughter of the goddess in the painting, so much less mature was it in form and character; the candid eyes, the limpid whiteness of the brow and neck were adolescent and touching when combined with the pensive grace of her attitude. Only her hair, like heavy thread of gold, remained, under my scrutiny, identical with the enchanting head of my memory.

And then, in an instant, every vestige of drowsiness left me. With the effect of a jerk my attention passed from her features, riveting itself on her expression. In that rain of silvery light — incomparably more brilliant than any which a sky of the northern hemisphere can shed — each shade of feeling revealed itself across the space between us. Regardless of caution I strained forward, pressing my cheeks against the uprights of the balustrade. With an emotion so sudden and intense as to send the blood pounding in my temples I saw upon this unknown face — affectingly youthful and defenseless — a look like my own.... Indeed it was more than that: startling and incredible to my gaze, it was not merely similar, it was the same. In her eyes, on her lips, in the droop of her shoulders, I read that acceptance of an irremediable doom, which, in all the world — not excepting the Halls of Wormwood Scrubs — I had only seen reflected in the little camp mirror on the wall of the room behind me.

As I stared transfixed — so poignantly moved that I felt the knuckles of my hand press on my heart as if to stifle a physical pang — a haze passed between us. Through the dead air a breath as from a slowly opening oven crept under the verandah roof; drops from my forehead splashed upon my bare forearms. Like a distant roll of drums, thunder sounded and died away behind the slope above. The sheen on a thousand glossy leaves sank and vanished amid encroaching tides of darkness. The figure of the girl below, fading to a white shimmer, gathered her skirt in one hand and turned toward the slope; suddenly, with a gesture childlike and passionate, she clasped the withered trunk beside her, straining her breast against its surface. Then, like a phantom flitting across the gray loom of the night, she passed into the blackness under the trees.

It is a measure of the effect produced by these moments that I have not the faintest recollection as to whether or no any storm followed. Yet the thunder of that region of South Africa is a thing to be remembered. In the native tongue the name for King George's Town means 'the Valley of Death,' by reason of the terrific outbursts of electrical disturbance that, at certain seasons — and especially towards the close of summer — concentrate from all points of the surrounding veldt upon the ironstone outcrop of the ridge below which the town stands. Nowhere else, even in the tropics, have I heard so deafening and unintermittent an uproar, or witnessed lightning effects so blinding.

But that night my senses were in abeyance. I doubt whether anything short of a bolt exploding down my chimney would have left an objective impression on my memories of the hours which followed. I was profoundly affected by a series of emotions that were not merely new but excessively obscure. For the first time during many weeks I forgot completely about myself and my fate. I felt rather like a man who, having dreamed that he has been condemned to the galleys for life, finds that (through the sort of mistake which happens in dreams) an innocent and beautiful stranger has been bound to the oar beside him. I was filled with amazement and pity. Especially pity. The question of the identity of this intruder on my solitude, thrilling and insistent though it was, receded before the problem as to who or what was responsible for the look on her face which had so appalled me. I was at the age of romantic and generous fancies, and the very fact that my thoughts had been so long fixed on myself produced, under the influence of this assault on my compassion, a rebound to the other extreme. As I tossed on my mattress there germinated within me, on behalf of this unknown fellow-victim of adversity, an indignation against life and the general scheme of things far more militant in type than any I had experienced on my own account. The small hours are no doubt productive of emotional vistas; but it must be added that the fact that the object of my solicitude had hair like thread of gold and a figure lovely enough for a daughter of my Italian goddess weighed with me not at all. So, at least, I was convinced at the moment. I saw myself on the trail of her persecutors, devoting my energies to her rescue and succor, behaving, in short, with the disinterested zeal only possible in one who has nothing to hope for — nothing but service to give.

The confidence with which I assigned to myself this strong but somewhat barren rôle in relation to any more tender aspect of the situation was rooted in circumstances to which so brief a reference has been made that they may have already passed from the reader's memory. Ever since the parting by the vicarage gate, weeks before, I had been haunted by a new and penetrating self-humiliation. She who had been my first girl friend, the companion of so many happy hours, had vanished from my life — I had never seen her again; to my mingled wretchedness and relief she had gone a few days later on a visit to friends in a distant part of the colony. But her glance which had stirred the darkness between us, her gesture which had wrung my heart, remained to obsess my thoughts and torment my dreams.

The virtues of humility, while generally esteemed, are regarded by the more worldly minded with reservations, as being apt to fit not too successfully into the business of living. Certainly they had betrayed me into a sad turmoil of mind and body. Owing to the events of my past and to the view I took of my own shortcomings, the idea that any one should fall in love with me had long been, in all sincerity, so remote as to become negligible. Seeing myself as an outcast whose every attempt to share the life of those around me was threatened with disgraceful exposure, the sudden realization of having drawn another — and, above all, the friend on whom I had centered my pent-up boyish admirations — within the scope of my evil destiny overwhelmed me with remorse and horror. That thought alone, heaven knows, had been enough to strike me dumb at her side — appalled by the measure of a curse which, in those moments, revealed itself for the first time as a contagion in my very person ready to infect all who drew near to me.... But my silence, during the interminable seconds while she gazed into my eyes, had hidden within it another, a more intimate shame.

Adolescence is shot through with trepidations — searchings, not so much of the heart as of the senses. Emotionally, as already explained, I was singularly unawakened. But, for all my isolation and self-discipline, I had not escaped the longings of boyhood and of the years that follow; nor had my inexperience avoided the nemesis of its questionings. I had learned more than I had guessed.... There, beside her in the shadows by the gate, I was ready enough for all that the moment awaited. Even in the extremity of my bewilderment and self-reproach I stood breathless — trembling in expectation of the stir of some irresistible response. And — within me not a pulse had quickened; my heart lay like a stone, heavy as lead.

It is easy enough now (if explanation be needed for the vagaries of human affections) to recognize that the strain of the days through which I was then passing afforded indifferent soil for the budding of sentiment. Suspense and fatigue are apt to blight the emotions. But at the time, as previously observed, my sense of proportion had gone by the board. I felt only that in a mysterious and supreme test I was being found wanting; and, in the weeks ahead, there was fixed in my brain the belief that to my countless shortcomings I had thenceforth to add an abnormal and unmanly insensitiveness.

Much has been written regarding the anguish of unrequited love, but the sufferings of a young male who had convinced himself that he is destitute of the passions of his kind have been seldom recorded. Yet they have their claim on the notice of the psychologist, if not on that of the poet. As I recall the memories of that period, I can affirm that among the hobgoblins born of the imperfect adjustments of youth none can leer more disquietingly.

It was, therefore, in the spirit of an authentic, if enforced, knight-errantry that, through the seemingly endless hours of the day following the event with which this chapter opens, I pondered this new and strangely disturbing incursion upon my solitude. The moonlit vision of the previous night projected itself in front of everything around me. Like a mirage it shimmered against the office walls and was framed in the window by my table; defying every transition of light and focus, and ignoring the habits of illusions, it became only the more substantial under my fascinated gaze. Since that morning I have had a secret respect for the necromancer's stock-in-trade; within the rim of my squat official ink bottle I obtained a tiny manifestation in silvered greens and black (with a single touch of gold) vivid enough to induce a partial hypnosis. If ever the conscious and subconscious brains may be presumed to be working in harmony, mine must have been coöperating that day; over and around this recurring image — so direct in its appeal to my chivalrous exaltation — there hung, like a scarcely discerned radiance, the glamor of some unimaginable rapture.

How I got through my duties I cannot remember. When, at length, the moment of release arrived I sat on tenterhooks at my desk, fumbling with the pages of my stores ledger, until the last of my companions had taken himself off. Then, with a rising excitement, I snatched my hat from its peg, slipped down the steps and along the path by the end of the building. Skirting the corner of the orange grove, I reached the top of the slope above. No circumstance could be more indicative of the change wrought by the past twenty-four hours than the fact of the associations of that all too familiar route being suddenly effaced. In a night I had emerged from the state of passivity into which I had fallen; amid the thrill of the present the memories which had battened on my nerves were wholly obscured.

On gaining the ridge, some minutes elapsed before I managed to get a glimpse of my objective; then, as I moved from point to point on the stony ground, a curl of smoke flying up on the breeze caught my eye; stepping a few yards further, I saw a chimney amid the foliage of the slope beneath.

During some former stroll I had vaguely noticed a house among the orange trees, but as it was invisible from the Reserve below, its existence had slipped, until last night, from my mind. Now I reconnoitered its position like a scout observing an enemy stronghold; or, more exactly — to revert to a previous metaphor — with the eagerness of a squire espying the dungeon in which is immured the lady of his quest. For the midnight visitor to the lower boundary of the grove had vanished, at the approach of the storm, in the direction of the ridge; and amid the speculations and theories which thereafter wheeled about my pillow, I had remembered the isolated roof among the trees.

As I strained on tiptoe to obtain a clearer view, any doubts I may have had in the matter were dispelled. With the scene of those happenings stretched below me in the evening sunshine there could be no question but that the yellow-washed walls just distinguishable between the stiffly waving boughs were those of the refuge to which she had turned with so tragic a gesture.

It is a common experience that a locality which has served as the stage of some nocturnal incident — especially when such occurs under the 'thievish light' of the moon — should reveal to a participator a much less significant aspect when viewed by day. No such contrast presented itself to my mind as I scanned the vista before me. Doubtless my imagination was busy and the sleeplessness of the previous night had told upon me. Be that as it may, there lingers with me to this hour the sensation of foreboding with which I surveyed that house and its surroundings.

At such moments atmospheric effects play a part. Few who have lived in South Africa are likely to forget its sundowns. The breeze, traveling over the vast spaces of the veld, takes on a mournful note; second by second the glow fades with a swiftness dramatic and confusing to European eyes; low clouds on the horizon, like the capes and bays of some desolate coastline, stretch darkening into the limitless saffron of the west; across the vanishing undulations night birds begin to call.

As I turned to retrace my steps down the path it seemed to me that among the secluded abodes which dotted the outskirts of the little town none was better situated to enclose a secret than this dwelling within its labyrinth of somber green.

The instant I had swallowed my evening meal I hastened back to my quarters. The moon was almost at its full; so dazzling were its beams that the glossy foliage of the grove seemed, like clustering prisms, to break the rays into countless tiny cataracts of brilliance, transforming the rows of trees to the semblance of a set piece of silvery fireworks. In the motionless air the festoons of bougainvillæa hung from the eaves and pillars, artificial and gleaming like metallic traceries.

For over an hour I paced the verandah in a fever of impatience. Curiously enough it did not occur to me that the visitor of last night might fail to return. If I had argued the matter at all (which I have no recollection of doing) I had doubtless persuaded myself that having once sought refuge from the heat indoors she would do so again. But, to tell the truth, I was in no mood for uncertainties. Through some process too obscure to be analyzed a conviction had sprung up within me that the vision I had seen was but a prelude to events which were beyond the scope of chance interference. I even felt confident of my ability, if need be, to will its recurrence. Fantastic as such states of mind must always seem when recorded, I am impelled, in view of all that lay ahead, to believe that I have dallied with many more fruitless imaginings.

As midnight drew near and the increasing torrent of light revealed no sign of movement upon the slope, I could not control my restlessness. The air was getting hotter; throwing off my jacket, I slipped down the open staircase to the path below.

A stone wall divided the bushes and flower-beds of the office grounds from the grove; posting myself in the shadow of the building, I leaned against the coping. Gradually, with the passing of the minutes, the fatigue of my vigil stole upon me; the excitement which had buoyed me up drained away; the slough of a despondency as dark as any I had yet experienced closed over my mind. My head sank on my arms.

Suddenly a faint rustling came to my ears. The Reserve was notorious for harboring snakes at that season of the year; I looked up quickly. The moon had crept round the corner of the building, and for an instant my eyes were dazzled. Then my heart gave a beat that made me sway: on the other side of the wall, not five yards away, her hand pressed to her breast, gazing at me with parted lips, was she whom I awaited.

CHAPTER X

During seconds which were destined to be the most enduringly remembered of my life, we gazed across the moonlight into each other's eyes. My astonishment and relief were instantly blurred by a startled uneasiness. There seemed to be no end to this unknown girl's capacity for exciting bizarre impressions. As I gripped the stones of the coping I saw emerge upon her face a look which, while wholly unaccountable, aroused in my memory the hint of some acutely felt experience; even her pose, as she leaned towards me, was hauntingly familiar. But, while I searched among my whirling thoughts, her expression changed. The strain of her attitude relaxed; with a confusion which showed vividly on the pallor of her cheeks she shrank backwards. A dry branch lying on the ground directly behind cracked under her foot; she slipped sideways and sank on her knees.

Employing an agility which the notorious Johannes himself could not have surpassed, I vaulted over the wall and leaped to her aid.

Before I cleared the distance she was up and turned as though to escape, but with a gasp she staggered and would have fallen if I had not caught her.

'Look out!' I exclaimed. 'Have you sprained it?'

She flinched away from my touch, bent down in an effort to feel her ankle, lost her balance again, and slid to the ground.

'I — I think it's only twisted,' she murmured.

'Rub it,' I commanded.

Taking off her shoe, she obeyed gingerly.

As I knelt beside her the concern with which I watched this operation merged itself in a variety of sensations exceedingly hard to define. To begin with I was slightly giddy; the transition from the inertness of the previous half-hour to this abrupt mental (and physical) activity had been upsetting in more ways than one. Then the excitement of those first moments had been curiously sobered by the inexplicable effect which my appearance had seemed to produce on my companion. It is true that, fleeting though the impression had been, I had observed with relief that her discomposure had faded while she looked at me. But now, as she crouched on the ground almost within touch of my hand, I felt, rather than saw — for her face was lowered and averted — that she was struggling with some residue of alarm, acute enough to counteract any physical pain from which she might be suffering. In fact, I was prepared to see her, at any moment, bound to her feet and make off through the trees like a wounded antelope.

But when, after a minute or so — with a scarcely audible 'Thank you' — she did endeavor to rise, her ankle gave way once more and she dropped back with another gasp.

'Look out!' I expostulated. 'Do give it a bit longer. It'll be all right soon, I expect. Anyway there's nothing to worry about — I'll help you back to your house.'

I was totally unprepared for the look she gave me; however bewildered one may be there is no mistaking downright terror when one sees it.

'No — no!' she whispered. 'Please! Oh, please go away! I shall be quite all right.... I promise not to move until it's better — if only you'll go!' In her distress she scrambled to her knees.

Taken aback as I was, I managed to assume what I intended to be a reassuring, elder-brother air. 'I say, that's no good, you know! You promise to sit still and then, in the same breath, you start jumping about! If you wait a moment I'll get ——'

'No, no!' she repeated, '... go!'

'But I can't,' I objected. 'I'll sit on the wall over there if you like, or up on the verandah. But I can't very well go away. I live here.'

'Here?' She cast a panic-stricken glance over her shoulder at the shining façade of the building. 'Surely — I thought it was — was some kind of an office.'

'So it is,' I explained. 'Only I happen to have quarters in it — up there.' I nodded over our heads.

She stared at me wide-eyed; her gaze traveled rapidly from the end wall of my room to the tree-covered slope, as though measuring the distance. The result seemed to produce some blank consternation. Clasping her hands, she bowed her head. 'Oh, I shouldn't have come,' she murmured distractedly. 'I — I thought no one was here.'

'I'm awfully sorry,' I said, after a pause. 'I'm afraid — it seems as if it were my fault, somehow.' I felt suddenly disconsolate. This air of mystification, although not altogether out of keeping with the romantic imaginings of which my neighbor had been the subject, was reaching a point that threatened to obscure, or rather, to wreck my part in the affair. Instead of arriving in the guise of a comforter it was painfully obvious that I was being regarded as a menace. And, for the life of me, I could not see what to do about it. Even if — which was out of the question — I were to take myself off and leave her to crawl home as best she could, there remained the fact that my mere presence as a tenant of the room overlooking the grove seemed, for some unguessable cause, to terrify her beyond measure.

As I sat on an ant-heap beside her a growing depression settled upon me. More than enough has been said to show with what fatal ease, in those days, my mood veered towards one or other of my obsessions. Now, amid the flatness that had crept over the situation, it was not merely discomfiture, or even disillusionment that intervened; something grimly recognizable stirred behind the confusion of my mind. New as the line of attack might be, I had the feeling, with my companion's words repeating themselves in my brain, that an unsleeping fate was at work once more: here, I was wanted less than ever....

'Oh, please — don't think that!'

I looked up with a start. Once embarked on so accustomed a channel my thoughts had swept me away with them; I had lost touch with the moment. 'Think what?' I asked dully.

'What you said just now — that you are to blame. It's all my own ——' She stopped, the words dying on her parted lips, her extended hand suddenly arrested. As I looked I saw stealing into her pupils, communicating itself to the tension of her pose, the aspect of incredulous dismay which had so perturbed me at our first encounter. On that occasion it had passed; now, as I met her gaze with eyes as puzzled and distraught, no doubt, as her own, it deepened into fear. 'What is it?' she breathed. 'Why do you look like ——? It's like — like ——' Her voice dwindled to silence.

Then, while the instants passed, while we strained towards each other in the moonlight, I understood.... There came to me, as though released from a secret chamber of my being, the first of those intuitions which were, in times to come, so strangely to unite us in regions where words do not reach; and with it flashed the clue for which I had been searching. On my face, as I waited by the wall, and again, a moment since when I had raised it from my hands, she had read something familiar: she, too, in her turn, had recognized, with dread and pity, the bond of an acknowledged despair.

In the human brain there is nothing more obscure than its reflexes. During those moments I was vividly aware of a contact different in kind from any I had experienced; there, amid the privacy and silence of the hour, all that I had dimly but so passionately longed for trembled, as it were, in the air about me. And — suddenly — I felt incapable of response. I was like a captive who, in the revulsion of his rescue, can only harp upon grievances which, until then, he had borne with stoicism. Instead of replying I dropped my eyes and plucked at the withered stems by my feet. 'It comes to the same thing in the end,' I muttered. 'Always.'

'How — how do you mean?' Her tones, hesitating and disconcerted, barely reached my ears. 'What does?'

'Just what you said — that I'm not wanted.'

'Oh, but' — she began breathlessly — 'you don't understand! It is so unlike that, so unlike what you seem to think. It is I who ——' She faltered. 'I can't explain, but ——'

I made no reply. The perverse thing that tugged at my brain prevented me from even looking at her; I continued to snap the dried grass in my fingers.

'You are so mistaken....' Her voice quivered. I glanced up hastily.

She was leaning on one arm toward me, her face full in the moonlight, the rippling mass of her hair gleaming like burnished gilt above the whiteness of her forehead. Under dark eyebrows her pupils showed almost black; her lips drooped in a curve childlike and pleading.

'It couldn't make any difference,' I said drearily. 'You were quite right. It is my fault; if I hadn't startled you, you wouldn't have tripped and hurt yourself. I am sorry.' With an effort I turned my gaze from her face. 'Do you think you are better?'

She bent hurriedly and felt her ankle and instep. 'Yes,' she said doubtfully. 'The pain is almost gone.'

'Then, I suppose ——' I hoisted myself slowly from the ant-heap.

'But ——' She seemed torn between relief and perplexity. 'I — I've been unkind. How have I managed to hurt you? I didn't mean it. You look so — so ——' — her glance met mine beseechingly — 'sad,' she murmured. 'It frightens me.'

I shook my head. 'You wouldn't understand,' I replied.

The heat of the night crept about us, enervating and seductive. A profound lassitude invaded me. As I knelt at her side I was visited again by an overpowering sense of unreality, as though the moment — this pause so inconclusive and pregnant with reticences — had slipped through some chink in time from another experience.

'How do you know,' she murmured, 'that I——'

'Because nobody ever understands,' I said.

'Perhaps you have never tried to tell.' The soft appeal of her regard clung to me like a spell.

'Everybody knows.'

'I am not like everybody. I know nothing. Except — except for two people I have spoken to no one for months — years. I am like some one behind — iron bars.' Her voice died away.

I stared at her aghast. Suddenly I gave a harsh laugh. 'Then you might understand, after all!'

Her gaze remained fixed on my face; she seemed to hold her breath, a startled question dawned in her eyes.

'Yes....' I nodded; slowly I looked away. 'Now you see how little there is to tell.' I found that my knees were trembling under me.

For an instant, like a fluttering leaf, her hand touched my arm.

'Not like that ——' she whispered. 'Don't tell it like that! You can't want to hurt me. Don't you see that it is true — what you said — that I could really understand? I don't yet — you are making it too difficult — but I shall, if you tell me. Because,' she glanced quickly towards the wall by the path, 'when you looked up, over there, I saw that you were unhappy like ——' She paused.

'Like what?'

She pressed a hand to her heart. 'Like — me.'

She shivered. In the stillness that followed I heard a sob. 'Oh, I've said too much! I shouldn't — I shouldn't. It's only because of never being able to speak.... And I oughtn't to have asked ——' She moved as if to rise. 'Forgive me!'

'No — no!' I thrust out my hand. 'I've been a brute. I've made a mess of it all. If you only knew how I've been looking forward to this! I'll tell you anything ——'

She stared at me. 'Looking forward ——?'

'I saw you last night.' With a gesture I waved aside the question on her lips. 'Never mind about that — I'll explain later. You mustn't go yet — please! Especially after what you've just said. I can't bear that you should think that things are really the same with us. However unhappy you may be, it can't be for the same sort of reason ——' I paused for breath.

'The reason doesn't matter when one is unhappy enough,' she said.

I gazed at her doubtfully, as though seeing her clearly for the first time. She seemed in that moment to have grown older; on the curve of her lips, in her attitude, had emerged an enchanting and tragic maturity.

'Not even if ——' I stopped.

'Not when people have suffered enough,' she repeated.

'I never thought of that.... You mean that whatever one has done, if one has had a bad enough time, you think ——?'

'Yes,' she said.

I stared past her into the blackness under the trees. 'It sounds wonderful, but' — I shook my head — 'if you knew...'

'You say every one knows.'

'Yes, every one except — except you. You wondered about my being here.' I nodded towards the building. 'That's why; there was nowhere else to go. They wouldn't have me. I'm a — sort of outcast.' I looked away.

Again I felt her touch on my arm.

'It's true.' I kept my face averted. 'If you knew — you'd be the same as the others.'

'Oh!' A low cry reached me, her fingers dropped.

I felt suddenly ashamed; turning, I saw her eyes bright with tears, through which shone the light of a wounded and gentle compassion; her hand hovered out. ‘How could you ——?’

I clutched at it. ‘I’ve been in prison,’ I said miserably. In the silence I heard my heart beating as though after a race.

Her gaze, startled, pitiful, remained fixed on my face. ‘Tell me,’ she whispered.

‘That’s all,’ I said. ‘There’s nothing more that matters. I’ve made a mess of everything from the start — I’ve never had any one ——’

‘Yes,’ she said softly, ‘that part! Tell me from the beginning.’

So, under the dying radiance of the night, with the shadows flowing into pools of blackness around us, I told her.

CHAPTER XI

THE moon had sunk behind the trees when I ceased. Amid the deepening obscurity my companion remained motionless, without a sound, the oval of her face gleaming faintly.

Only once, when I had spoken of my reception by Mr. Bentinck, did she stir. 'Yes,' she nodded, 'he would be like that.'

'Why — do you know him?' I paused, astonished.

'He is ——' her voice sank, 'he was a dear, dear friend of my father's. Go on!' she added breathlessly.

When I reached the last stage and, haltingly, and in few words, narrated the disaster to my hopes — spoke of my isolation and despair, her stillness seemed to become accentuated, her face to shine paler, her eyes more darkly luminous.

Abruptly I ceased, overtaken as in a dream by an inner sense of fantastic unreality. The hour, the scene, the echo of my words confiding, appealing, confessing to this figure, shadowy, and become, to my overstrained perceptions, suddenly as impersonal as the night around, seemed all of a piece with some incredible illusion.

In the silence I heard her breathing quicken; she put a hand to her breast. Turning, she peered through the gloom at the building behind her. The glistening surface had vanished in a gray outline, ghostly and darkening, above which a white sky was filling with stars.

Again, but this time as though in deep thought, her glance traced a line from its walls to the now impenetrable blackness of the slope. For some moments she sat with bowed head; then, raising her face, her eyes met mine.

'We've been brought so near ——' she whispered.

I leaned forward, trying to read her expression. 'Near?'

She nodded. 'Together.'

Before the intensity of my regard the dusk seemed to lighten between us. 'You mean in ——?'

Gravely, with an effect indescribably moving in its childlike simplicity, she nodded again. 'In being so sad.'

'But,' I stared at her incredulously, 'do you really mean — even after all I've told you — that you don't mind talking to me — that you still think one's past doesn't matter if — if one has been punished enough?'

'Not if one is able to bear it.'

'But there it is — that's the difficulty,' I said quickly. 'Suppose it gets too hard? Suppose one loses everything, hope — everything?'

Her eyes remained unwavering. 'I don't know — only that if one can bear it nothing else counts.'

I gazed at her curiously. ‘By “bearing” you mean not going to pieces?’

‘I think so,’ she said doubtfully. ‘Just living; doing what one has to do — not being afraid.’ Her voice dropped.

‘But,’ I hesitated. ‘Don’t think I am horrid: it is only that I want awfully to understand — surely you were afraid a little while ago when you saw me by the wall — when you tried to run away?’

She shook her head. ‘That was different. I was only frightened — that isn’t what I mean by being afraid.... I thought you might want to speak to me — to find out why ——’ She stopped.

‘But I did!’ I said excitedly. ‘Please don’t be angry — I can’t help it. I did want to speak to you, desperately. I had seen you last night, from the verandah,’ I pointed over her shoulder, ‘and I’d been thinking of nothing else. You know what you said before I told you about myself: that you would be able to understand, because I looked like — unhappy, like you? Well, I felt the same about you, exactly the same. It haunted me all day. I went up to the ridge to see if I could see your house. I was afraid some one was being unkind to you. That was the only reason I wanted to speak — in case I might be able to help. It never entered my head that I would start talking about myself, instead! I can’t think how on earth I came to do it. I feel frightfully ashamed.... It was only because you weren't like anybody else, somehow. You did seem to understand ——'

'I did — I do,' she interrupted quickly.

'Well ——' I put out my hands. 'Don't you see? Surely you can't mind telling now? You can't. I've told you everything' — my voice broke — 'about the disgrace — everything.'

A stillness fell between us. Agitated as I was, I had become aware of a sudden rigidity in her aspect, as though, while I spoke, she had been deprived of all movement by an invisible touch. Her face was lowered, hidden by the mass of her hair; under her chin, above the curve of her breast, her hands were clenched in an attitude strained and disquieting. Again I had the impression that in the next instant she might leap to her feet and vanish in the darkness.

'I've been wicked... wicked.' The words rose as though from the ground at her feet.

As I waited, amazed, she raised her head swiftly. 'You should strike me. I deserve it. If God is listening I think I deserve to be struck dead. I've been so wicked because,' she shivered, 'because I was lonely and wanted — I don't know what I wanted... I could have sent you away. You would have gone if I had asked you. Instead, I let you speak — made you tell me. And now I am hurting you. And you've been hurt so much already.' Her arms dropped, with one hand she felt blindly on the ground as if to help herself to rise.

'But you're not!' I cried hastily. 'If you mean that you would rather not say anything — about yourself, don't. It doesn't matter. I don't care about anything except — except being with you.'

I was extraordinarily conscious of an immediate relief in making this statement. It seemed, as it were, to clear the air. However exalted one's resolves, the moment arrives when, in such a ferment of emotions as that with which I had been contending during the past hour, something must rush to the surface. Now, at any rate, I knew where I was — whither I had been led. My dreams of playing the knight-errant in relation to my companion had vanished from my mind, obliterated for the time being, in a single passionate desire merely to do, or say, whatever would keep her by my side.

It seemed that my change of front came just in time. For a moment I thought that she had not heard me; then, with a quick intake of her breath, the tension of her body lessened. She shook her head despairingly. 'It isn't enough,' she faltered. 'I mean that your being kind and good doesn't excuse me. I had no right to listen. I'm cut off even from that.... You called yourself an outcast. But it's only because people don't know any better — don't understand. You found that, yourself, when you told me, didn't you?' In the increasing light of the stars I saw her eyes bright with tears.

'Yes — but ——' I stretched out my hand toward hers.

'No!' She shrank back. 'You mustn't. You mustn't forgive me, because I can never be fair with you, I can never tell — never, never. My secret isn't like yours; it isn't something that people just *think:* it's real.... Oh, stop me!' Her pupils, fixed and dilated, shone in sudden panic. 'Oh, that's what makes me so guilty: always — every time I speak I say too much.... Each second we're together I know that you are wondering about me — being sorry for me — wanting to help. You said so yourself, and I feel it here,' she pressed both hands to her heart. 'I never knew before that one could tell what people think. And every thought about me — even yours — means terrible danger ——' With a violent twist of her hips she got on one knee.

I caught her wrists. 'Listen!' I said rapidly. 'If I promise — swear on my honor — not only never to ask about — about whatever it is that is troubling you, but, in addition, never when I'm with you, or at any time, even to think of it, will that do? Wait!' I tightened my hold. 'I understand better than you suppose — I know exactly what you mean about thoughts being a danger, even if one says nothing. I've felt that often with people, about myself. I promise not to do it; never, from now on, to think of anything you don't want me to — if only you'll stay being my friend.'

'But it's impossible — you couldn't!' With a hopeless gesture of her shoulders she struggled to free herself.

'I've given you my word. But ——' Abruptly I released her.

'But what?' She glanced quickly at me.

'Only that I suppose my word of honor doesn't mean much.' I turned away and stared into the darkness.

Suddenly the tree-tops seemed to take flight above my head: her fingers, cool and soft, with the texture of flowers, crept into my hand.

'I believe — I believe.' Her breath reached my cheek like a caress. 'Forgive me.'

Scarcely daring to move my lips I murmured, 'Then you won't leave me?'

Her fingers tightened on mine; gently they were withdrawn.

'I must go now,' she whispered, after a long pause.

'But you'll come again?' My shoulder touched hers; for a moment against my bare forearm I felt the warm curve of her breast.

Slowly she leaned back. 'If I said no, it would be of you that I was thinking.' Her words hung like a sigh in the air between us.

'But you won't?' I said eagerly. 'You've come twice. Why should you stay away?

This is your grove — you have more right here than I. You remember what you said.' I pointed from the dark oblong of the building behind us to the slope, rising black against the sky. 'How near we've been brought to each other. I believe now that's why I am here — why everything has happened. Because it has brought me — to you.'

'But if I only bring you more sadness. Worse than sadness?'

'I've promised never to think of that,' I protested.

The last sheen of silver had vanished overhead. The night glittered with the matchless black and gold of African starlight. In its brightness I had a vision of her face transformed; on her lips, in her eyes, I saw, for the first time, the sweetness of a smile which from that instant was to enchant my thoughts and haunt my dreams.

Slowly she bent and drew on her shoe. For some moments she leaned forward, looking before her. Then, raising her head, she stretched out a hand.

Silently I helped her to rise; she took a step up the slope.

'Is it better — can you walk?' I asked anxiously.

She nodded. 'I think so. Yes.' Disengaging herself from my hold, she stood motionless; in the deeper shadow where we were I felt, rather than saw, her gaze on my face. 'I can't go without,' she paused as though searching for words, 'without saying one thing. I know it is wrong. But you've been so wonderful; you've made everything so — so easy. I must try.' Painfully she drew a breath. 'If you ever hear the truth about — me ——' Her voice failed.

'But we've settled not to talk about that ——' I began.

'No, let me go on.' She steadied herself against a branch. 'If that happens, and you feel inclined to — to hate me, remember that the one person who knows, the only person that understands everything about the — the circumstances, says that there's no danger in my doing this ——' Again she stopped.

'You mean in coming here?'

'Yes,' she said faintly.

'Are you sure?' Startled by her tone, I glanced past her at the sable recesses of the grove. 'If you're running any kind of risk, you mustn't come. We'll meet somewhere else — anywhere you like. I don't understand, of course, but I can't bear your taking any chances ——'

She gave a gasp. 'It isn't I that — oh, I mustn't say more! I've been wicked again, and this time it's all my own fault. I should be made dumb! I just felt that I had to tell you — what I said just now. If anything happens you'll understand.... It was selfish of me to worry you. I've spoiled everything — just when,' she shivered, 'we were so — happy.'

'But you haven't!' I said quickly. 'The only thing I care about is whether you are all right. If coming here like this isn't too difficult for you, that's all that matters. You're sure, though?' I stepped closer. 'You're not running any risk?' Before my eyes there flitted across the gloom a sinister vision of the yellow-washed house among the trees above.

She shook her head; a smile, enigmatic and wistful, came to her lips. 'Not when I'm with you,' she murmured. 'I must go.' She stepped slowly backwards.

'But, I say! When shall I see you again? To-morrow?'

'Perhaps....' Her regard lingered on my face. Then, with a start, she put a hand to her forehead. 'Oh, I mustn't promise. Wait! Let me think.'

'It can only be at night?' I suggested, after a pause.

'Yes, yes!' She turned quickly. 'Never any other time; and even then — I can't ever be sure. It depends — it's so difficult to know ——'

'Never mind,' I said hastily. 'Don't worry now. I'll be waiting. I get back always about eight.' I pointed up towards the verandah. 'I'll be on the lookout. There's no fear of my missing you. I'll be thinking of nothing else. You'll try, won't you, to come to-morrow?'

'Yes.' With a momentary return of her childlike gravity she gave me her hand. 'Good-bye. And thank you for helping me and—telling me. You won't be sorry that you've told me?'

'No,' I said slowly. 'I'll never be so glad of anything.'

Gently she withdrew her fingers from mine.

'Let me come a little way,' I said. 'It's frightfully dark in there, and if your ankle——'

'No!' She slipped beyond my reach, her voice raised in urgent dismay. 'Leave me; oh, please! I can't come again, ever, unless you promise never to try to come farther. Promise!' she panted.

Disconcerted, I stared at her. 'All right,' I said unwillingly. 'But surely to-night you might let me help you——'

'To-night...!' Her words came to me out of the darkness. 'You will never know how much you have helped me to-night.' The undergrowth rustled, a branch cracked, then silence fell.

CHAPTER XII

I AM told that nowadays Time is on the way to being promoted to the much-canvassed position of a Fourth Dimension. Without pretending to anything in the nature of an intuition in regard to matters far beyond my depth, I have a clear recollection that, on entering my quarters a few minutes later, I was acutely aware of having returned, so to speak, from a journey, the scope of which bore no relation whatever to the period that had elapsed since I had last crossed the threshold.

I remember feeling as if I had been on a voyage through space. The simile, although banal, strikes me now as not inappropriate. A tour among the stars would no doubt be vastly exciting — productive of mysterious and incommunicable emotions; one would get back from it exalted and rather dazed. And these — allowing for the metaphor — were precisely the sensations with which, as I lit the candle on my mantelpiece, I gazed about me.

So far afield, indeed, were my thoughts that in spite of the lateness of the hour, the idea of undressing and getting into bed failed to reach me. Instead, I lifted the candlestick over to the camp table in the middle of the room and, sinking into a chair, leaned my head on my hands.

But even the most vertiginous mental states must give way to the requirements of youth. The fatigue of the past twenty-four hours overtook me like a coma; within a second I was asleep.

I awoke with a start — a leg of the chair must have slipped under me.

Dawn had come. As I raised my head from my arms the room showed a chilly, unfamiliar air in the early light. A mist from the river crept over the Reserve, obscuring the view and drifting across the sill in grey wreaths. While staring before me I was aware of one of those fugitive perceptions which attend returning consciousness — in this instance a sense of physical discomfort oddly blended with something else. A severe crick in the neck (I was sprawling over the table midway between a widely opened window and door) speedily accounted for the first. But some seconds passed before the remaining element — a pervading elation — as it were a sweetness on the texture of the senses — awakened any response in my brain. Then, as on the springing up of a blind, last night's scene rose in front of my eyes.

Lurching to my feet, I crossed to the stretcher-bed in the corner and dropped on to the edge: a splendor of moonlight and blackness swayed about me; and in its midst a figure, youthful, mysterious, enchanting, crowned with gold....

My lids drooped; with a jerk I pulled myself back to wakefulness. The light was growing.

The mist streamed upwards into a brightening sky; a fluttering of birds sounded from the branches by the window. As in a trance I heard again the murmur of a voice, tender and consoling.... Overcome by a torpor of slumber and bliss, my head fell on the pillow.

Of the day to which, an hour or so later, Baluka finally awoke me I retain only a hazy recollection. It was not so much happy as transfigured. Like the spirits of the departed — if their own reports are to be relied upon — I found difficulty in adjusting myself to a condition of felicity so remote from anything for which experience had prepared me as to be excessively confusing.

That it all — not merely the events of the previous night but the sensations of the day — seemed like a dream goes without saying. A hundred times during the sultry morning and afternoon hours at my desk, while the routine of the office flowed sleepily around me (Departmental activity at King George's Town was apt to ebb in the later weeks of summer), I had, metaphorically, to pinch myself to make sure that I was fully awake. And yet, as my conscious thoughts hovered between my ledger and a phantasmagoria of moonlit and starlit images, I was dimly aware that the effects, at least, of those midnight happenings were not the stuff that dreams are made of. For, as if by magic, the miseries which had so long haunted and darkened my world had been thrust forth, leaving, already, scarce a trace behind them. Suddenly, like the Pilgrim of old, and as miraculously, I felt my load loosed from my shoulders.

I recognize now, of course, that this impression could be accounted for by the fact that, at the moment, my mind was wholly occupied by novel and enthralling vistas; and, like other people, I was capable of concentrating on but one view at a time. There was, however, another cause at work which held the promise of a more permanent release. At last, after an existence of repressions, after the culminating isolation of the recent past, I had, for the first time, unburdened my heart — I had made confession. And the formula, consecrated throughout the ages to the needs of men, had worked. In a form that filled my breast, if not with peace, assuredly with rapture, I had got absolution.

But it was inevitable, as the day passed, that this undercurrent of deliverance and joy should be disturbed by waves of doubt. Even if it were all true (which began to seem impossible), even if the companion of that bewitching scene were to return (a very considerable 'if,' on her own showing) — how could I be sure that the intervening hours might not have brought some disastrous change in her attitude? Little as I knew of women I had acquired a precocious experience of human nature and of the ways of fate. In a situation so fraught with riddles and the menace of heartbreaking disillusionment, it is small wonder that by nightfall I had worked myself into a torment of mingled impatience and panic.

Strangely enough it was in the recollection of my promise that I found a measure of comfort. The very extravagance of the circumstances which had called it forth brought an assurance of reality — of something my fancy could not have invented. And it had proved effectual. It had stayed the flight which would have dissipated the vision of my bliss; on its acceptance by my companion had turned every hope for the future. With this thought came a rush of shame. A hundred times during the day, strive as I might, the yellow-washed house had risen before my eyes; my brain had circled in fantastic speculation.... Anew, as I climbed the steps to my quarters, I vowed to be faithful alike to the letter and to the spirit of the trust reposed in me.

As I sat at my ‘high-tea’ in the fly-blown dining-room of the inn, an appetite which, to my secret astonishment, had survived unimpaired through the stress of the previous weeks, suddenly deserted me; the food literally stuck in my throat. After a few mouthfuls I stumbled to my feet and, ignoring a peevish inquiry from the proprietor — who was extremely touchy where the cooking of his establishment was in question — I hurried back across the darkening Reserve.

Mercifully my vigil was not so prolonged as on the previous night. Just as the waning moon rose above the trees, illuminating the open space below as on the sudden lighting up of a room, my eyes, which had been fixed on the obscurity of the slope, caught a glimmer of white. Bound by my pledge, I had remained on the verandah, but now, in a dash that nearly precipitated me head-first down the outside steps, I gained the path and vaulted over the wall.

Like some woodland spirit materializing out of the shadowed depth of the grove, the figure which I had begun almost to persuade myself had been but the evocation of a beguiling memory came towards me.

We met by the tree where we had parted; for there she paused, awaiting my approach, a hand resting on a withered bough, her hair gleaming in the moonlight.

Our greeting was curiously silent. I was tongue-tied and breathless; but, as I reached her side and gazed into her eyes, insensibly, before a word was spoken, the fears and questionings of the day faded from my heart. In her glance there came to me the revelation of that inestimable security with which it was her gift to invest all that had passed between us — all that was to come.

Side by side we turned to the bank where we had sat while the sky faded and the stars came out the night before. At first, of course, I questioned her about herself — if she had got back safely, if her fall had left no ill effects — and spoke of my self-reproach at having kept her to so late an hour. Then, for a time, after the murmur of her replies ceased, a hush fell upon us. In the radiant peace of the night, heavy with the scent of orange blossoms, the agitations of our previous meeting died out of my thoughts. An inexpressible sense of ease, of an undreamed-of comradeship, overwhelmed me.

And, while the moments passed, it seemed to my entranced perceptions as if my neighbor, too, had slipped under the spell of the place and the hour. The quiet of her presence — a stillness both of body and spirit, which I had already observed — had in it a sort of youthful and confiding intimacy. As she sat on the ground at my side, her chin on her hand, the strain had vanished from her face, leaving, in the veiled darkness of her eyes, in the curve of her lips, an elusive, thoughtful serenity.

When, at length, we found words, our talk turned, as by a mutual understanding, away from the painful confidences of the previous night. We spoke of Mr. Bentinck, whom she had not seen since she was a child, but of whose friendship and generosity she seemed to preserve memories as grateful as my own. He was, it appeared, a connection of her father's; they had been intimate both at home and in the Colony, and at some juncture (her reference to which brought a sudden, well-remembered shadow into her eyes) he had stood between his relative and a dire calamity. As she spoke of these events I could not but guess from the change in her expression and the check she swiftly put upon her words that we were straying on forbidden ground. Abruptly she fell silent.

'Do you write to him?' she asked after a pause.

'I did when I first arrived, but I'm afraid I haven't for a long time — not since things went wrong,' I confessed. Then, meeting her gaze, I added awkwardly, 'Of course if I ever do again, and somehow I think I shall now — I've felt a brute at not writing after all his goodness to me — I won't say anything about — about you. I mean — if you'd rather not.'

For an instant her eyes looked into mine; she nodded and, bending forward, began thoughtfully to pluck at the dried stems at her feet.

It is difficult to convey, in relation to so slight an incident, an idea of the sudden rejoicing which arose in me at her reception of my stumbling effort to relieve her mind on this very obvious point. Having witnessed the intense, even agonized alarm she had displayed at any hint of approach to the mystery with which she surrounded herself, I was thrilled and touched at the trustfulness of her glance — at her unquestioning acceptance of my fidelity to the pledge established between us.

And while, once again, the shadows lengthened about us and, inevitably, our talk veered towards the matters uppermost in our hearts — to the circumstances of our meeting, to those first sensations of recognition so strangely experienced by each alike, and, finally, to the history which, under emotions so unpremeditated, I had poured into her ears — the conviction grew upon me that in this quality of acceptance, in this loyalty to the spirit of every word, of every thought, that formed the basis of our relations, there was expressed her unique and unchangeable characteristic.

Amid the memories of that hour this discovery remains like an accompaniment penetrating the rise and fall of our voices, filling my brain as with a subdued but exultant melody. As I leaned towards her, watching the changing depths of her eyes, the delicate carnation tingeing the pallor of her cheeks; noting, with beating pulses, her gestures, the youthful exquisiteness of her form, I found myself scarcely heeding her words or my own rejoinders. Like a refrain swelling in my breast was the consciousness that here, beside me, was the one being in all the world to whom the secret places of my heart were known; that she alone, in her constancy to an ideal of compassion and faith, beyond my dreams, had accepted me for what I was.

By the tree where we had greeted each other (already assuming in my eyes a symbolic aspect of its own) we said good-bye. The anxieties regarding our next meeting that had pursued me during our earlier moments together had gradually receded; but now, with the cavernous shadows of the grove waiting to engulf her, they rushed again to the front. As I held her hand, the recollection of the house amid the labyrinth of darkness above us chilled me as with the forebodings of a nightmare.

'I've done my best,' I stammered, 'to keep my promise.'

Her eyes met mine; she flushed quickly, within my fingers I felt an answering pressure. 'Yes, I know — I've felt that you have.'

'Well ——?' There was no mistaking the entreaty of my voice.

A swift discomposure — a dawning terror — passed across her face, vanishing in an expression of concentrated thought; then after a long pause, as though on some irrevocable decision she softly withdrew her hand. 'Yes...' she whispered, 'I, too, will remember ——' As her voice died away her glance returned to meet mine, enigmatic, strangely touching in its effect of gentle resolve.

So began and was confirmed between us a pact which, alike in its nature and in its setting, still evokes for me across the dissonant murmur of years the voice of youth, the cadences of its specific romance. Sealed amid shadows, it was a testament to an immortal brightness; in its light we had forgotten our sorrows and remembered only that we were young. Within each other's eyes we discovered, in our turn, that new heaven and new earth but for which mankind would have vanished long since from a universe of illusion. And because we had suffered early and much we embraced our happiness with both hands.

CHAPTER XIII

YES, we were faithful to our vision — to our opportunities. Amid the passing of the days we lived only for the day to end; while others slept we met in a world of our own, a place of darkness and stars and the scented heat of the southern night. Sundered as we were by reticences, ever conscious of the ban — pregnant with ominous and, to me, torturing perplexities — that lay betwixt us, we were bound only the closer in our determination to forget, while we were together, everything but each other; to find in what we had come to name the Secret Country an escape from the menaces, the realities of life.

It seemed as if, on those stifling nights, Fate, too, were nodding. From first to last no human presence disturbed our privacy. On rare occasions above the whirr of the cicadas and the roar of the frogs we would hear across the Reserve the laughter of returning dancers, or the faint tinkle of a piano, accompanied by bursts of song and inebriated whoops from the inn. But the languor of burning weeks lay upon the little town and its inhabitants; after the vast chromatic glow of sunset had died out of the dusty air the paths leading to the ridge were deserted, and a deepening solitude fell upon the glade and its surroundings. Only Baluka, stalking mysteriously out of the shadows, might chance to witness our greetings, or hear our whispers from the darkness. But that ex-commander of fallen legionaries would pass on his way with an air of saturnine and punctilious unconcern.

Meanwhile the African summer waxed to a crescendo. The freshness vanished out of the dawn; the sun rose in a blaze that, before the early shadows melted, set the distances quivering like the air above a lime-kiln. Through the glare of the morning hours the darkened office filled with a dry, prickling heat that tickled one's skin like the contact of invisible cobwebs; from clefts in the shutters and doors smouldering shafts pierced the dimness as from an outside world gone up in flames, and the noonday walk across the Reserve resembled a journey through the focus of a gigantic burning glass. But there were signs that the end was near. After midday a diffused, blinding whiteness crept overhead; ranges of opalescent cloud festooned the lower reaches of the sky, gathering towards the west in thundery formations, behind which the sun sank in a wild flare of threatening gold.

An effect of profound unreality clings to those days; the fact that I see them as through the medium of an iridescent but vaguely tinted haze is the less to be wondered at when it is remembered that during the bulk of their working hours I was more than half asleep. Indeed it is a tribute to my youthful constitution that, throughout a period in which I came to life, so to speak, only between midnight and dawn, I should have been able to perform my duties without exciting undue comment. Perhaps the lassitude that had marked my demeanor in previous weeks may have served me; from the point of view of official intercourse the difference between gloom and somnolence might no doubt escape notice. And yet, even at the time, I was astounded that no one seemed to guess — that Grey's efficiently indifferent regard, as he gave me an instruction, failed to detect — that just behind his well-groomed head I was beholding some enchanting vision....

As a matter of fact, however, those daydreams were shot through with incursions of torment. Like the twinges of a malady on which one dare not dwell, nameless apprehensions invaded my thoughts; in spite of my vow, images of the yellow-washed house below the ridge fastened on me with horrifying suggestions of persecution and evil. That I managed to shake them off at all was due, in truth, far less to the virtue of my promise than to an increasing, almost superstitious, conviction that the tie which held together the whole fabric of my happiness depended on my doing so. It is impossible to convey in words the effect produced on my mind by the relations which governed those starlit trysts. It was as though, from the moment of our greetings by the withered orange tree, I passed into a world of the Thousand and One Nights where, amid the magic freedom, perfumes, and shadows of a garden of bliss, my whispers, the caresses of my unspoken thoughts, became subject to a capricious sorcery. Never could I tell when, as on the pronouncement of some sinister formula, the adored companion of my happiness might not rise from my side and, with hurried words of farewell, vanish out of my ken — to be swallowed up in a darkness as impenetrable as any cast by a magician's cloak. At such moments a question, a gesture of expostulation, would call into her eyes a look which not merely rent my heart but conveyed a warning that haunted me until next we met.

Sometimes, indeed, she lingered — seeming to defy, in spite of herself, these secret monitions; and there were times when her firmness deserted her and I was allowed to climb by her side through the undergrowth that bordered the path leading to the blackness above. But always, at the confines of the steeper slope, she turned and, with an urgency that permitted of no further demur, bade me return.

In a situation the uncertainties and repressions of which would have demented natures less ardent than mine, one fact, at least, became increasingly clear — she had dire cause for her alarms. Whatever might be the case with other secluded abodes in the vicinity, the menace that lay upon the house in the grove was based on no mere infringement of a social code: in her own words it was 'something real.' Once when our parting had been more than usually prolonged and the false dawn was already whitening the east — as we leaned toward each other in a last silence, a distant clamor rang out. For an instant I was at a loss as to its direction or nature. Again it broke the quiet — the faint, imperative jangling of a bell from the obscurity of the trees beyond. My companion's fingers went rigid; with a low cry she thrust her palm against my chest and leaped up the path; a second later I heard her skirt tearing and her footsteps scattering the stones among the bushes above.

The following night, and the next, I awaited her coming in vain. And when, at length, she returned to the glade her face bore signs of stress and of impending calamity at the sight of which my restraint was all but swept by the board. I caught her hand, determined to insist — not, indeed, on an explanation — but at least on a right to voice my passionate resolve to share, if I could not avert, any disaster that might lie before her. But, once again, the gentle steadfastness of her glance, the mute pleading of her lips, impelled me to silence.

Then, a few nights later, my patience, if not my longings to help, were unexpectedly rewarded. By the light of the young moon — for nearly a month had passed since our first encounter — I saw, as she hurried towards me, the brightness of some suppressed excitement in her eyes. Almost before our greetings were over, ere we had turned to our accustomed seat on the bank, she proposed, to my incredulous surprise, that we should spend the following day together — start early in the morning, cross the river by the ford a couple of miles above the town, and make our way to Raglan Bush, the celebrated forest of the District, which stretched like a gigantic thicket towards the slopes of the northern foothills.

In my amazement and delight I was momentarily bereft of words, but before she had ceased speaking my mind was already searching as to how I could obtain the necessary leave from the office. Then I remembered that next day was the anniversary of some Colonial exploit (the significance of which now escapes me) and that all public buildings would be closed.

‘Of course,’ I cried, ‘to-morrow’s a holiday.’

She nodded. ‘That was what I was thinking of, so I——’ she hesitated and her voice sank, ‘I tried, and I’ve got — a holiday, too....’ Putting her hand on my sleeve, she added shyly, ‘It’s such a wonderful chance! If we start early enough we’ll get across the river before any one is about, and then everybody will be at the races and sports, and we can get back before they come away. You — understand, don’t you?’ She gazed at me appealingly.

‘Yes, rather,’ I said awkwardly, ‘you don’t want ——’

'No one, no one, must see me.' Her cheeks whitened. With an effort she looked into my eyes. 'It's our only chance of getting off — of being together like — like other people....' Her whisper died away.

'It'll be quite easy,' I assured her hastily. 'We'll manage absolutely all right. If only we do it — that's all that matters! Where shall we meet?'

At my words her face lit up again like a child's. Dropping side by side on to the bank, we abandoned ourselves to the excitement of the programme on hand. It was arranged that I should be waiting for her at sun-up on the road over the ridge where a path issued from the upper end of the grove. As there would be no time for me to get anything from the inn she insisted on bringing luncheon for us both, while I should be allowed to contribute a bottle of Drakensberg which I happened to have in my quarters.

In view of the early start before us we separated soon after our plans were completed. With a last wave of my hand I vaulted over the wall and ran across the garden and compound to the Departmental Store (of which I had a key), where I abstracted old Timms's alarm clock from his office. My final sensation as I dropped asleep was of my heart beating an ecstatic duet with its powerful tick-tack on the chair by my pillow.

When its uproar awoke me, dawn was already in the sky. Instantaneously, with returning consciousness, the recollection of what the day held in prospect suffused the white-washed walls of my room with so rosy an illusion that I leaped out of bed in a panic; but a glance at my watch assured me that all was well — sun-up was yet a good hour ahead. Nevertheless, as I boiled my kettle and swallowed my customary breakfast of rather stale bread and jam — set out by Baluka with military precision on the camp table the night before — I was haunted by the presence of some unexplained tract of brightness in my brain. Then, in a flash that turned me dizzy on my chair, I identified its source: within an hour, there, on the ridge framed in the window before me, I was to see a beloved face — so dearly familiar beneath the rays of moon and stars — for the first time in the light of day....

From that instant I remember nothing but a ferment of excitement, which landed me breathless at the summit long before the appointed time, with the result that an excellent opportunity for witnessing a spectacle for which the South African veld is deservedly famous was sadly wasted. As a matter of fact, save for impatient glances, I turned my back on its gorgeous progress, staring with riveted eyes along the cactus-bordered path that marked the entrance into the grove.

At last, just as a shaft of gilt shot from behind me through the dusty recesses of the trees, a figure stepped out of the gloom at the far end of the alleyway — girlish, clad in white — suddenly dazzling in the radiance of the moment.

As I ran towards her she stopped. Matching her snowy print gown, sprayed with faint sprigs of heliotrope, she wore a sunbonnet of the same material which, as she paused with bowed head, completely hid her face and hair; only at the nape of her neck curls and strands of gold glittered in the sunlight.

Maddeningly, while I drew her to me, its curves concealed her features; placing my fingers among the ribbons beneath her chin, I raised her face to mine. On the pale rose of her cheeks a flush deepened; her eyes, within the black border of their lashes, remained closed. Then, as I bent and touched her lips, the lids quivered and opened.

Entranced, I gazed into pupils no longer darkened by the night, but shining with the limpid, softly changing gray of their unshadowed depths.

'In the light ——' Her voice trembled; I felt her heart beating against mine. 'You've never seen me like — other ——' she faltered and stopped. 'Perhaps, now, you won't' — gently she tried to push me from her — 'care.'

'"In the light"' — holding her more closely to me, I repeated her words — 'I feel as if I were only beginning to care!'

She shook her head despairingly.

'Yes.' I heard the pulses thumping in my ears. 'In all the world no one else has ever found out what it is like to be in love twice over with the same person at the same time! It sounds nonsense,' I laughed breathlessly, 'but it's true.'

With a sudden intentness she looked up into my eyes, her glance wandered over my face; lifting her hand, she touched my hair. 'Yes,' she nodded. Freeing herself from my embrace, she murmured indistinctly, 'Perhaps it is true.'

I held her wrist. 'What are you thinking? Tell me!'

Quickly, as she turned towards the opening of the path, she caught my hand to her lips. 'Just what you said — I feel the — same,' she whispered. 'Come.'

In silence I unloosed from her shoulder the strap of the satchel containing our luncheon; and, hand in hand, we crossed the road to where a track led down between rocky, aloe-crowned banks, in the direction of the river.

The morning heat was growing. Soon, however, the sun passed behind a haze, and clouds rose in violet-tinted ramparts along the eastern horizon. Below us the veld lay parched and brown. A smell of rain was in the air; the river flowed swollen and copper-colored past its beds of glossy reeds.

At the ferry an old Fingo in a tattered jacket and loin cloth poled us across to the northern side. From that point we had before us a tramp of four miles over the ruts and stony outcrops of a road that climbed along the steep, bush-covered banks to where the forest, like a huge green shadow, stretched across the landscape from the distant hills to the river.

As I look back it seems to me now that, on the negligible elevation of that boulder-strewn track, I was lifted in those morning hours to a region whither, even in the fulfillment of then unimaginable dreams, I have never since attained. I walked remote from reality — on an earth transfigured to the likeness of my own desire. Empty and silent under a blinding sky, it was filled with rapture — with the music of a voice, with the touch of a hand.

Such a mood takes small account of time and space. When at last we reached the outskirts of the forest the morning was far advanced. A noonday hush lay in the shade of the great trees. Rain had fallen in the night; as we passed through the outposts of kareebooms, already budding in a hundred exquisite tints of mauve and lilac, a freshness like the breath of spring came to meet us. Across a brook rippling between vividly sprouting bushes, acacias, feathery and graceful like dancers on tiptoe, thronged the outer ranks of trunks that, in dark battalions, guarded the depths beyond.

Following a trail along the margin of the stream, we stepped as if by magic into an underworld of green. Like divers exploring the floor of the ocean, we made our way past rocks and shelving banks festooned with growths that seemed to climb and coil with more than vegetable sentience, struggling up towards the light which, as on the surface of a motionless sea, filtered through the foliage overhead.

On a flat boulder overhanging the stream we ate our midday meal in circumstances as near to bliss, perhaps, as the children of this planet can hope to arrive at. Then, taking off our shoes and stockings — it must be remembered that we were very young—we sat side by side on the edge, dangling our feet in the cool water.

An afternoon heaviness sank upon the air; the emerald twilight about us took on an aspect of deepening and primeval solitude. Softly my companion broke the quiet. 'It's like coming back after being cast out by — the other people.'

'Coming back?'

She raised her hand; a bluebuck had parted the bushes on the far side of the stream; trotting to a magnificent assegai-wood tree, he rubbed his head against the bole; then unaware still of our presence, clicked his tiny hooves and was off in a lavender-tinted flash.

'Yes,' she whispered, '... to Eden.' Slowly she turned her head and looked into my eyes...

This is the tale of how, in a distant land, amid loneliness and despair, I found my love

— not of that love itself. Already the reader will have guessed that it is outside my scope, and indeed, my desire, to narrate the daily growth of a passion which — inevitable as it may seem to have been made by circumstances — was, in truth, the outcome of affinities so profound as to defy analysis and to render description unmeaning. My story waits. Perfect and without alloy as were those hours of release and sylvan privacy, their happiness was more insecure than the gossamer on the leaves above us; we, to whom love had come clothed in that finality which death alone can share, clung to each other with the vehemence of those who have no morrow. And Fate, impotent for the moment before the inexplicable compensations of the human heart, stood in wait.

Once, indeed, his shadow fell across our very caresses. By a not very surprising coincidence each of us had brought a gift for the other, a memento of our holiday — of our troth. In my case it took the form of the only article of jewelry I possessed, a long, old-fashioned gold chain with a sapphire seal which had belonged to my mother; my companion put into my hand a faded copy, beautifully bound, of 'Maud' (the 1855 edition — I have it before me now). As, with interlinked fingers, we turned its pages I paused at the flyleaf; near the top was written a name — 'Rowley Fane'; below, in the same hand, but obviously at a later date, had been added the words, 'To Inez from her Father.'

With a start I looked up. 'Was Colonel Rowley Fane your father?'

The color ebbed from her face; for an instant there crept into her eyes an odd, almost challenging glance. 'Yes,' she answered.

'By Jove!' I said, and gazed again at the page.

As far back as Eton days Rowley Fane had been a vaguely familiar figure in my mind. The qualities which in later years made him conspicuous up-country in Africa had left something of a mark on school annals; and when, during the Zulu War, he had leapt into fame in the columns of the press as a leader of irregular horse, the tales of athletic prowess, feats of strength, and diversified insubordination that had attached themselves to his memory through successive generations of his schoolfellows blossomed into a romantic and somewhat lurid renown which survived to my time.

Since my arrival in the Colony I had often heard of him. Whenever the subject of native wars cropped up his name had a way of slipping into the talk. From the date of Langalebale's rebellion, when he had been seconded from his regiment for service in Natal, he had made his career in Africa; hunting and exploring during interludes of peace, and, when strife was in the air, training and leading bodies of irregular cavalry in every campaign south of the Zambesi for twenty years. Reckless, efficient, popular alike with his troopers and with the natives, he had acquired one of those semi-legendary reputations that have been scattered by Englishmen of his type through the pages of local history in every outpost of the Empire.

My interest in him had been greatly enhanced by an assertion of old Timms's (who posed as an authority on such matters) to the effect that during the action of the Hlobane Heights he, Colonel Fane, had defeated in single combat no less a person than Cetewayo's general on the spot — now, in these later days, sadly fallen from his martial estate — Baluka, in fact! According to Timms, Fane, unhorsed in the mêlée, found himself attacked by the gigantic Zulu commander. Employing his notable skill as a swordsman, he parried a first and second assegai launched at close range; then, in the act of lunging, he stumbled — his saber snapped against his adversary's shield. As Baluka raised his stabbing spear Fane, clenching in his fist the severed hilt, got home a terrific blow on the point of the other's chin. This was too much for Baluka, even in the zenith of his might, who plunged backwards into a thorn bush; while Fane, with a wave of his hand and an apology shouted in excellent Zulu (he had a great reputation for courtesy and no doubt felt that his prize-ring methods had infringed the etiquette proper between rival commanders), dashed after his horse.

The idea that this celebrity of African battlefields should occupy the relation of parent to the girlish figure round whose waist my arm was at that moment resting was sufficiently unexpected to come with something of a shock. It had never occurred to me to connect her name (almost the only material fact I knew concerning her) with his. If I had even heard that he was married the circumstance had slipped from my mind; certainly he was the last sort of person that one would naturally associate with domestic ties — especially amid the humdrum surroundings of King George's Town. His career had been wholly identified with other and distant parts of the continent, with Natal, Mashonaland, and the big-game tracts of the north. Moreover, he and his exploits belonged to what seemed already ancient history; to an era in Colonial affairs of which veterans like Timms discoursed regretfully as of a vanished and heroic age. Of his later days I knew nothing; if I had given the matter a thought it was to picture him as returned long since to England, or ——

I glanced up. 'Is he' — I hesitated — 'still alive?'

My companion's gaze had remained fixed on my face. 'Yes,' she answered. Suddenly her lips quivered, I felt her arm loosen itself from my shoulder; covering her eyes, she bowed her head on her breast.

Instantly my vision of a romantic and

equestrian figure leaped, as it were, into space. Overcome by contrition, I straightway forgot its existence in my efforts to allay the strangely agitating emotions aroused by my question — to banish from between us, during the fleeting moments that remained, everything but our love....

Not until a burst of crimson from the west lit up the woodland gloaming did we return to a consciousness of our surroundings. A glance at my watch told us that we were nearly an hour behind the time we had fixed for our departure. In something like a panic we pulled on our shoes and stockings, and, racing along the path, emerged into the glow of the sunset.

Save for two or three parties of Kaffirs stalking in single file, or pausing, with a volley of the incomprehensible clicks that adorn their conversation, to drape themselves in their blankets, we met no one until we reached the ferry. While we waited on the bank a couple of Cape-carts packed with farmers and their families returning from the day's festivities in the town rattled by on the road behind us. My companion, her eyes bent on the ground, her face concealed by her sunbonnet, shrank in front of me; as I helped her into the boat I felt her arm tremble.

Once over the river and on the path leading to the ridge, we were safe from such encounters. The Reserve Road was deserted, its surface shining faintly in the growing moonlight; hand in hand, as when we started twelve hours before, we slipped across. By the entrance to the grove she stopped. Breathless after our climb, vibrating with the cumulative emotions of the day we stood speechless; in that moment of parting our eyes saw nothing but each other, our ears heard only the beating of our hearts.

Suddenly a clatter of hoofs rang out; round the corner of the road wheels flashed into the moonlight, a towering shadow bore down on us. 'Look out there!' cried a voice.

As we leaped aside a horse shied violently towards the ditch. From the seat of a high dog-cart an imposing bearded figure, pulling skillfully on the reins, stared at us reprovingly.

'Young people dressed like ghosts,' his glance passed between my tennis flannels and my companion's gown, 'shouldn't ——' With a start that set the horse plunging again he leaned forward, peering from her upturned face to the entrance of the path behind, then back at me.

I stepped forward. 'I'm sorry, sir ——'

At the sound of my voice the Commissioner (for it was he) threw up his hand. Had we indeed been ghosts, had the opening in the cactus hedge suddenly revealed itself as a threshold to Hades, his gesture could not have been more startling; his whip, catching in a buckle of the harness, dropped from his fingers to the ground.

I dived down to get it; as I fumbled — the horse was restive and the butt had become wedged under the wheel — a whispered cry reached me from the side of the road. 'Please — oh, please ——'

Leaping upright, I saw over my shoulder the white flutter of a dress vanishing along the path.

'Inez!' I sprang to the entrance. 'Inez, stop!'

There was no reply. Dashing in pursuit, I was just in time to see her plunge off the track down through the bushes. Again I called; as on the night when the bell pealed amid the trees I heard her receding footsteps scattering the stones in the darkness.

For a moment I stood irresolute; the impulse to follow was overwhelming. Then the entreaties, the warnings, the terror, with which she had repelled every effort I had made to accompany her into the depths beyond flashed to my mind. Baffled, with new forebodings in my heart, I stumbled back to the road.

Mr. Carleton had driven on. As I emerged into the open he was on the point of disappearing round the next corner. Just then he looked back; in the now brilliant moonlight I saw him rein in his horse and wave his whip.

An intense disinclination took hold of me. I was agitated, confused — vaguely angry. As I hesitated, wondering if I should pretend not to notice his signal and slip down the footpath opposite, I heard my name called. There was nothing for it but to obey.

When I reached the dog-cart he motioned to me to come round beside the step. From out of the shadow cast by his hat his imperious heavy-lidded eyes examined me with somber attention.

'I wanted to see you' — his manner was strained and preoccupied — 'in any case.' Suddenly I realized that he intended to ignore the incident at the corner above us. 'I only got back from Cape Town a couple of days ago, and I'm off again to-morrow to fetch Mrs. Carleton.' He paused as though, with an effort, collecting his thoughts. 'I have many messages for you from Mr. Bentinck. I gave him an excellent report of you.' Changing the whip into his left hand he glanced at his watch. 'I'm afraid, though, from what I hear, that things haven't been going so well since I saw you last?'

I averted my eyes. There had been moments during previous weeks when conceivably, had he been on the spot, I might have unburdened myself to Mr. Carleton; but that was impossible now. Too much had happened — too much was actually in process of happening (my mind flew back to the scene of a few minutes before — to the anguished appeal so mysteriously addressed to him by the girl I loved). It was more than a cubbish surliness that tied my tongue. I was no longer a free agent. My life was bound up inextricably with another far more precious — with a fate veiled by secrets infinitely more obscure than mine.

'Don't think I want to force your confidence,' he continued. 'And I have an appointment now. But remember,' he leaned forward, towering over my head with the aspect of rather formidable kindliness characteristic of him, 'that I am, in a sense, a family friend; I owed a great deal, when I was a young man just about your age, to your great-uncle. As a matter of fact I know more of your difficulties — of your past — than perhaps you are aware of. And I think you saw that we — Mrs. Carleton as well as myself — wished to be your friends.'

'You were very kind,' I mumbled.

'Come and see me when I get back. Meanwhile I shall have a talk with Mr. Bentinck. Between us we'll see you through, all right.' His voice ceased on an odd, abrupt note. 'But — remember ——' the dog-cart creaked as he swung round in his seat. '*That'* — he pointed to the corner behind us with a sudden and extraordinary effect of tension — 'what I saw just now — never!' His hand shook in the moonlight above me; in his agitation, as he turned back, he tightened the reins with a jerk, the horse leaped forward. 'For God's sake' — his tones rose to a shout as he disappeared round the bend — 'anything but that!'

CHAPTER XIV

It had been agreed between us that we should not meet that night. Lulled in the happiness of the afternoon hours, I had accepted the prospect with little more than a passing demur; the future had been without meaning to me then.

Now, as I hurried across the Reserve to my quarters, the circumstance recurred to my mind with an effect of staggering dismay. The events of the last few minutes had raised up shapes of bewilderment and alarm that I suddenly felt would become intolerable if I were left alone with them. I cannot describe the confusion which Mr. Carleton's behavior and, still more, his parting words had produced in me. It must be remembered that the mystery which surrounded my companion — ever present as it was in my thoughts — was known to me only through herself; not a hint regarding it had reached me from elsewhere. I have tried to indicate something of the specific quality that distinguished social relationships in King George's Town — the aloofness maintained by certain elements among its inhabitants, and the curiously negative attitude of the rest of the community in respect to them. Whether, had I continued to follow the normally gregarious life of my early weeks there, I might have chanced to hear some remark concerning the house in the grove or its tenants, it is impossible to say — there is nothing more capricious than the odds that govern such matters. But the increasing seclusion of my own existence, coupled with my fear of saying a word to any one which might lead to an infringement of the spirit of my vow, had made the contingency so remote that I had come to regard it as negligible.

Now it had arrived — and in circumstances so bizarre as to strike the ground, almost literally, from under my feet as I stumbled along the moonlit path. That Mr. Carleton — of all people — should apparently be cognizant of facts which, whatever their nature, I had the best reasons for knowing were sedulously, indeed desperately, concealed, was startling enough. But it was his response in face of them that dumbfounded me; incredible as it seemed, there was no disguising from myself that at the moment of our encounter by the entrance to the grove, and again when he drove off shouting that half-uttered warning, his manner, the very intonation of his voice, had betrayed the dread for which my companion had prepared me as being the portion of all who should penetrate to the secret of the house among the trees.

I reached my quarters in a whirl of irresolution. Should I go forthwith to the Residency and demand an explanation? If ever there was a case of either too much having been said or too little, it would seem to be in the Commissioner's parting words to me. Yet — with my hand on the railing of the steps — I paused. Young as I was, no one knew better than I the incalculable results that may follow the asking of a question. Besides — there was my pledge. ... Once again it was fear, alas, rather than loyalty that stayed me. With what fatal enlightenment might I return from such an interview? The facts mattered not at all; I knew my love to be immune from the power of any disclosure. But, for the hundredth time, I drew back, terrified, from the thought of challenging the covenant of silence over which, like the Shekinah of a mystic faith, hung the presence, radiant but intangible, of my felicity.

Dazed by conflicting misgivings, I dropped into a chair on the verandah; but it was impossible to remain still. The memory of the cry that had reached me from the side of the road as I bent under the dog-cart tortured every instant. After pacing restlessly in and out of my room I threw off my jacket — the night had become intensely hot — and descended the stairs. Leaning against the wall, I scanned the dense masses of the trees above; not a leaf stirred. To my eyes there was something forbidding in their immobility — a hidden threat beneath that screen of silver brilliance.... I became abruptly conscious that if I lingered there any longer my nerves would get out of hand." Turning away, I prowled up and down the path.

As I paused aimlessly by the gate leading across the Reserve I remembered that the hour of my evening meal was passing. For some moments I hesitated; although I had walked over a dozen miles since sunrise, with no more than a few sandwiches and some fruit to sustain me, I felt little desire to eat. I glanced at my watch — after all, it was as good a way as any other to get rid of the time; swinging open the gate, I took the path to the inn.

But when I came within sight of the squalid, lamp-lit windows and heard the clatter and bursts of laughter from the dining-room my mood changed; the thought of facing that racket was insupportable. I turned quickly; Baluka would have laid out my breakfast as usual — I would make a meal on that and some cocoa.

A sudden lassitude overtook me as I re-entered the grounds. The prospect of endless hours ahead — I had completely lost the habit of going to bed at a normal time — weighed on my spirit with almost forgotten pangs of loneliness, to which was added at every step an increasing, nameless foreboding. At the sight of the glade, moonlit and empty, I could have groaned aloud.... With dragging feet I climbed the verandah step.

As I turned to the stairs leading to my quarters, the blackness within the further doorway moved: a figure slipped out and faced me. In the deep shadow of the roof I caught a glimpse of an outline, cloaked and hooded, which, as I started involuntarily, shrank back — passing, an instant later, into the triangle of brightness lying across the end of the stoep; the hood dropped — a halo of gold flashed in the moonbeams.

'Inez!' I leaped forward.

Crouching against the verandah rail, she thrust out an arm. 'No!' she cried sharply. I heard the sobbing of her breath; the cloak fell open, she was pressing a hand to her side as if in physical distress.

'I couldn't bear it,' she panted. Her face gleamed whiter than the moonlight; her bodice, open at the neck, was dragged low on one shoulder, as though, in the act of undressing, she had flung the cloak about her in a gesture of desperate haste. Stricken by some unguessable shock, her eyes met mine, anguished, unresponsive — questioning. In them, in her attitude, I beheld a shrinking — as it were of abasement — unendurable to see.

'No!' she cried again, straining backward over the railing. 'Don't touch me! What did he tell you?'

'Tell me?' I paused, momentarily bewildered. 'Who?'

'Mr. Carleton.'

'How do you mean?' With an effort I pulled myself together. 'How do you know ——'

'I ran back to the road. I heard him call you. What did he say?'

Feverishly, in my confusion, I tried to elude the issue. 'Oh, all sorts of things. He spoke about Mr. Bentinck — he's just back from Cape Town — and he saw a lot of ——'

'No! Please ——' Tears rushed suddenly to her eyes. 'Tell me what he said — about ——' Her voice broke.

'About what?' I echoed miserably after a pause.

'About my ——' she drew in her breath, 'about me.'

I stood silent before her.

'Dear ——' her face worked painfully, 'tell me...'

There is nothing more mysterious, human nature being as it is, than the difficulty which may attend the telling of a lie. One is sometimes tempted to think that the secret of the ethical universe lies hidden in the moment when, facing the homicidal yells of his tribe — or perhaps gazing upon tears bright in primeval moonlight — man first discovered in his heart that inexplicable inhibition.

Stumblingly (the task was made infinitely harder by the vagueness of the episode) I repeated Mr. Carleton's words. Wincing — closing her eyes as if before a blow — she strained back against the railing, without a sound, almost it seemed without breath.

When I had finished — after all there was little enough to tell — she remained rigid, harkening as to some whispered echo from the night around.

Slowly she raised her lids. ‘That was all?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

Her glance searched my face. ‘He had spoken to you about yourself — before?’

I paused, surprised. ‘Yes.’

‘About what had happened — about things having gone wrong?’

‘Yes — a little. Some one must have told him.’

‘He had been — kind?’

‘Yes.... He said he and Mr. Bentinck —— Oh, don’t let’s bother about that.’ I moved impatiently.

She nodded gravely. In silence she gazed at the glittering flags by her feet. Suddenly she looked up.

‘My dear, I am thinking of you — at last.’ With a movement like a child’s she raised her face to mine. ‘I must make myself look at you. It is awful to be so ashamed.... I’ve been cruel — cruel and hateful. I suppose it is always the way when two people care as we have — when love comes mixed up with sadness — one of them is unselfish: and the other snatches and clings.... But,’ she clasped her fingers, tears ran down her cheeks, ‘dear, try to believe — I’ve been like that only because I love you so. That first night, here,’ her hand fluttered towards the glade, 'I tried to send you away ——' She paused as though for breath.

'But you couldn't,' I interrupted quickly.

'I didn't try enough. At first I was frightened, and would have run from you if I could. But even then, when you were kneeling beside me — while my ankle hurt — it began,' she pressed a hand to her heart, 'this feeling — of needing you.... I think I must have loved you the first moment, when you looked up from the wall,' she pointed across the path. 'And when you said that about not being wanted — you remember?'

I nodded.

'I couldn't bear it. I longed to stretch out my arms.... All the time I knew I was being wicked — that I should make you go. But I couldn't, I couldn't. That was why I made you tell me about yourself — to keep you. I thought I should never see you again.' Her voice broke in a sob.

Again I tried to take her hand, but she moved it aside.

'You were so sweet....' She smiled painfully. 'Dear, you will never understand. You are so hard on yourself; you fancy every one else must be the same. It is so unlike that. You think I say such things only because I love you, but other people — people like Mr. Bentinck and Mr. Carleton, who know all about the past — have shown that they believe in you and care what happens. You wonder how I know. My dear, do you suppose I couldn't see, on the road up there,' she pointed toward the ridge, 'why Mr. Carleton behaved like that — why it was such a shock to him to see us together? It was because he felt as I've said — because he is fond of you ——'

'But ——'

'Wait. Dearest, I must say something that will hurt you — that will break my heart. Just now, when I made you repeat what he said — when I knew he hadn't told you the truth, the real truth,' she shivered, 'about me — I had a great temptation.... That was why I asked whether he had spoken about yourself. Then I knew what he meant when he said, "Anything but that": he meant that all would come right for you yet — that he and Mr. Bentinck would help you to begin afresh; and, because you were brave and good, you would wipe out the past; that what had happened here didn't matter, except' — her glance fell slowly — 'except about me.... So now,' she put her hands in mine, 'I must let you go.'

I kept my fingers passive under hers. 'Where?' I said.

She shook her head.

'You see — you've no answer. Inez!' Suddenly I caught her to me. 'Listen! I've let you speak. You've put words in my mouth — thoughts in my head; you've said you "made" me do this and that. You've lost sight of the real me altogether — of what I'm really like!

Do you imagine that after holding on to you as I've done in spite of everything — in spite of all the mystery and feelings of helplessness that have nearly driven me mad sometimes — I'm likely to let you go just because Mr. Carleton, or any one else, knows what you won't tell me, and ——'

'Darling! I'll tell you — I'll tell you, now. Listen!' She pushed against my embrace.

'I won't listen! I won't allow you to think that it even counts! — that it, or Mr. Carleton, or anything in the whole world, counts — compared to my loving you. You've spoken of my telling about myself that first night. Do you remember what you said? You said that what one had done didn't matter if one had suffered enough. Well, it's the same now: anything that has happened — anything in the future — has no importance, no influence whatever, if one loves enough. The only reason I ever thought of — of the things you want to explain was because I was afraid for your sake. I couldn't help that. I can help it less than ever now! It isn't that I want to know — you've seen that: it's because I feel things can't go on like this. Apart altogether from this evening's affair I've realized it for ages. Ever since the night when you came back after we heard the bell ——'

I felt her go rigid in my arms. 'Wait,' I cried, 'let me finish. It's only of the future I'm thinking ——'

'No! No!' She flung herself back. 'Never that! There's no future for us—for me. None! I won't let you ——'

'Inez!' I had to hold her against the verandah pillar. 'You must listen. Don't think I'm such a fool as to look forward to anything. God knows I've been taught that lesson! I'm speaking of the next weeks — days, if you like. If I'm right, and something is going to happen to you, no power on earth ——'

Suddenly her body relaxed; she swayed within my arms.

'What is it?' Anxiously I bent my head; her face showed gray in the moonlight, her eyes were closed. 'Inez! Do speak: what is it?'

'Let me sit down,' she whispered.

I supported her across the stoep to the doorway where she had awaited me; she sank on to the step. Holding her hand, I knelt beside her.

'I'll run upstairs and get ——'

'No — please!' Her fingers tightened on mine. 'Sit here — beside me.' As I obeyed, she laid her head against my arm. 'Let's be quiet — just together' — her voice died away.

Around us the insect clamor of the night shrilled and fell; clouds blotted out the moon, passed, and gathered towards the west in vast summits of darkness amid which lightning flickered incessantly. The heat grew; under my saturated tennis shirt perspiration condensed and trickled in chilly streams about my body. Through the stagnant air sounded a distant growl of thunder.

My companion stirred, her lips moved. I leaned over her. 'My love...' she murmured '— a little longer. I'm so — tired.'

As she spoke a louder rumble came from beyond the ridge. She started, her lids opened. 'I didn't hear the storm,' she breathed. With a shudder, hurriedly, supporting herself on my arm, she scrambled up. 'I must go!' She stumbled across the verandah and grasped the railing.

'Inez! For heaven's sake ——' I jumped after her. 'Wait!'

She slipped down the steps. 'No! You don't understand! It's what you said: anything may happen ——' Panting, she raced up the path.

At the wall she staggered; I caught her round the shoulders. 'You can't go like this!' Suddenly my temper gave out (after our long day the fatigue and strain of the last hour had told on me, too). 'I won't be left like this! It's not fair!' Roughly I tightened my grasp. 'I've had enough of it. If you go I'm coming too: if any one is frightening you I'll hanged well ——' The words checked on my lips. Again, a numbness — as of a creature desperately hurt — communicated itself from her body as it lay crushed against mine. Baffled, I withdrew my hold and steadied her against the wall.

She gazed at me dumbly; her arm groped about the surface of the stones.

Sullenly I broke the silence. ‘I’ll lift you over.’ As I moved a spasm passed across her face. Raising my hand, she kissed it again and again. Covering it with both of hers, she pressed it against her breast; her pupils, black amid the ivory gleam of her cheeks, looked into mine....

My head swam. ‘At least’ — I blurted out — ‘can you promise ——’

She nodded. ‘To see you once more — whatever happens. Yes. And to love you till I die; and always, always more....’ She bent her head.

A louder crash sounded from the west. Again I felt her lips against my fingers; slowly she raised her eyes, entreatingly.

Placing my arms around her, I lifted her on to the coping; as she dropped to her feet on the far side I slipped over.

Hand in hand we passed across the glade. Supporting her waist, I led up the path beyond the withered orange tree.

In silence we climbed through the darkness. On reaching the steeper ascent she stumbled.

‘Rest a second.’ I held her closer. ‘I was a beast just now — but this feeling of your being frightened drives me wild! If I were any good — if it made an angel of me instead of ——’

Her fingers tightened on my arm; in the gloom I saw the wan ghost of a smile. ‘How do you know how angels are made?’ she whispered.

We had gained the higher slope of the grove, where I had never before penetrated. The obscurity increased; I had difficulty in fending off the branches and twigs that thronged the path. My companion's steps faltered; at each instant I expected her to halt and bid me return. But I had made up my mind: to-night I would not leave her until we came within sight of her home.

At last the blackness lightened, the path was opening out. Suddenly she gripped my hand. 'When is he — Mr. Carleton — coming back?'

I considered for a moment. 'He didn't say. Next week perhaps.'

I heard the laboring of her breath. 'Promise to do what he said — to go and see him. You must do all that he wishes — everything.'

I shook my head. 'He'll send for me if he wants me. Besides, he'll be frightfully busy after being so long away. But ——' I paused; hastily I collected my thoughts. 'If I do have to go ——'

'Yes?' Her breathing stopped.

'Well — if he says anything about this evening ——' I hesitated. 'Very likely he won't; but if he does ——'

I felt her fingers tremble.

'He may try to tell me — well — about you. And — it's just struck me — perhaps, after all, you'd rather I heard from you. Would you?'

She leaned away. 'It doesn't matter,' she said indistinctly.

'But,' I stared at her, 'surely it would make it easier if you ——' Gently I pulled her towards me.

'It could make no difference,' she breathed. 'All the love in the world' — her hand went cold in mine — 'all the love in my heart — is powerless against ——' Slowly she raised her eyes; her glance traveled over my shoulder.

I turned; above us, beyond the further trees, I saw a gable, yellow in the moonlight.

A chill crept from her fingers into mine.

'Darling,' her voice was barely audible, 'you were right. Let us wait — just say nothing. There is so little time before us, and,' she pressed my hand convulsively, 'we may still have one happy hour. But not if you know, not if I tell you.... Truly as you love me, you would be thinking of — it. And so should I. That is why, all these weeks, I've said nothing....'

Silence fell between us. 'Dear,' her voice broke; she watched me painfully. 'Don't imagine too much.... It's something simple — and terrible.' She shivered. 'Something as old as the world.'

'As old as love?'

She bent her head. 'Stronger,' she whispered. 'Come, you must help me to the top — then go.'

The last few yards of the path rose steeply.

At the summit we paused in the shadow of a massive camphor-wood tree. The storm had died away. Before us, on the other side of a low wall, lay a garden, its flowers and shrubs gleaming in the moonlight. I had a fleeting impression of a two-storied house beyond, yellow-washed, silent, profoundly secluded amid the encircling darkness of the grove.

'Darling! Go!' My companion threw herself in front of me, raising a hand before my face. 'Now! At once — please — please. You are frightening me!'

'But you're scarcely able to stand — far less walk!' I glanced across the garden.

'Yes! Yes!' She pushed vehemently against me. 'All I ask of you is to leave me — at once — here: not to look....' Her voice fell to an agonized whisper. 'This isn't good-bye! I swear it. I swear to see you again. But oh — go!'

'All right.' Unwillingly I relinquished my hold. 'Wait a second though.' I darted across the path. Leaning against the wall were some garden tools and, among them (I had noticed it by the merest chance as we halted near by) lay a battered-looking Kaffir stick. Snatching it up, I ran back and thrust it into her hand. Unheedingly her fingers closed round it. With a gesture of entreaty — of anguished farewell, she backed out of the shadow, swayed for a moment in the opening of the wall, then stepped on to the path.

Breathlessly I watched her. Twice she stumbled — steadying herself by aid of the stick; suddenly I saw that instead of looking where she stepped her eyes were fixed on the upper windows of the house. Following her gaze, I stared at each in turn. The moon shone full on the glass; from where I stood nothing could be distinguished but glistening reflections. Vaguely I noticed that several panes were missing, the apertures being covered with what looked like brown paper. My glance, flitting over the façade, became aware of an extraordinary aspect of neglect — or rather of disrepair. In addition to the patched window frames traces of dilapidation revealed themselves on almost every square yard of the structure. The distemper on the walls was stained and cracked, large areas had peeled off, exposing the crumbling bricks underneath. Woodwork, denuded of paint, showed white and powdery in the moonbeams; the corrugated-iron roof glittered through the remnants of its brown coating.

Yet my hurried scrutiny disclosed signs of care, oddly in contrast with this decay. Such panes as were intact shone brilliantly; the stoep — an untidy region in most King George's Town houses — was scrupulously neat; roses climbed up the walls in a trim and disciplined luxuriance....

With a jerk my gaze returned to my companion. Apparently reassured, she had lowered her eyes and was hastening forward. Instead of approaching the front door she turned to the verandah steps, and, with dragging feet, crossed to a French window. Grasping the jamb, she looked over her shoulder; for a long moment she gazed blindly in my direction, then, lifting the latch, vanished within.

Instantaneously I heard a scream. For a fraction of a second my heart stood still: then, with a leap that landed me far among the flower-beds, I dashed towards the house. A second scream and a crash — as of some one falling — reached me faintly. A final bound carried me from the path below clear across the stoep: thrusting back the sash, I burst over the threshold.

In the same moment, as near as may be, I sprang out again! Any dweller in a snake-infested land will exonerate my reflexes at that juncture: for, coiled just inside, lashing venomously, with hood extended, was a large ringhals — a peculiarly deadly species of cobra common in the locality. As I paused, temporarily bereft of action, the inflated, hissing head darted from side to side in a paroxysm of fear and malevolence. Like other snakes he would have retreated if he could; but, caught against the lower frame of an upright piano that stood at an angle from the wall, he was denied an exit save across the seemingly inanimate form of my companion, huddled on the carpet.

Glancing wildly round for a weapon, I saw the Kaffir stick lying below a chair immediately within the window. Thrice I had to leap back before the maddened, threshing onslaughts. At the fourth attempt I was successful; snatching up the stick, together with a cushion that had fallen beside it, I flung the latter at the brute's head. Retaliating furiously, he thrust his fangs into the embroidery: with a back-handed cut (it was awkward work aiming below the keyboard) I got in a lucky blow. Half-stunned, he swayed outwards, the coils loosened; a second later I smashed his neck.

Dropping the stick, I leaped over the twisting body and knelt beside my beloved. In a frenzy of dread I felt her wrists and cheeks. Catching sight of a sofa, I lifted her; as I moved across the floor a tremor ran through my arms.

'Inez! For God's sake, are you bitten? Tell me — did he ——'

Uncomprehendingly she gazed at me, then, shuddering, she struggled to put her feet to the ground.

'It's all right — I've killed him! But,' I shook her desperately, 'did he get you?'

Her eyes closed. 'I can't remember — I must have fainted — I think I fell away from him. I feel nothing....' She dropped her head on my shoulder.

'Well' — partially relieved, I loosened my hold — 'I expect you'd know by this time ——'

As I spoke her lids opened with a jerk, she stared round the moonlit room; incredulous dismay dawning in her glance, she sprang upright in my arms. 'Oh, it can't be true! — I've brought you ——'

Her voice died away.... Motionless, her hands pressing stiffly against my chest, she listened.

A heavy, descending tread sounded behind me. With my eyes fixed on hers I was conscious of a singular premonition — as it were of a misgiving in my veins. The creaking of the staircase ceased: slowly I turned my head.

A figure, inexplicable and appalling, stood in the moonlight of the hall. Tall, erect, clad in a shirt and trousers, its aspect evoked childish dreams of mediæval horrors; for from a sort of skull-cap descended a mask or curtain, concealing the face and reaching below the breast. As in the hood of an inquisitor, eyeholes stared blankly from amid the folds.

While I gazed transfixed, it took a step forward. Raising an arm in a gesture violent and imperious, it bent its regard on me. The hand pointed across the room to the open window; suddenly the surface of the mask covering the region of the mouth, bellied outward; hoarse, whistling, punctuated by bursts of startling resonance, a sound filled the room that set my heart jerking. Inarticulate, beyond words formidable, there could be no shadow of doubt respecting its intention. Involuntarily I tightened my fingers; but I was too late. Wrenching herself free, my love clasped a hand over her eyes; with a movement of despair, terrible in its finality, she, too, pointed....

For some instants I stood my ground. Then, before these inexorable pointing fingers my spirit failed. With a groan I turned and stumbled across the threshold.

CHAPTER XV

I REMEMBER little of the return to my quarters. It may be that in youth the brain is more easily stunned — in a psychological sense — than in later years....

A dim impression persists of crashing down the slope, tripping on loose stones, tearing my clothes among the bushes; of slowly climbing the stairs to my room.

My main recollection is of unutterable fatigue, shot through with acute nervous, or rather, visual distress. Like a child partially roused from an evil dream I recoiled from every glance I cast about me.

On entering the door I must have dropped on my bed. Sprawling there, propped against the wall, I remember thinking that I would never sleep again. And the next moment, very likely (for I was physically worn out), I toppled over on the mattress, and lay like a log.

With the coming of morning, as it happened, I was spared the experience of gradually returning consciousness. In the midst of dreaming that I had been caught on the open veld in a terrific hailstorm, I awoke with a start. Something (presumably hail) was, in fact, falling about me; the next moment another shower rattled against the wall. Raising myself, I stared at a number of foreign objects strewn on the blanket. Still stupefied with slumber, I rolled on to my feet: mysteriously, some one was throwing gravel in at the open door.

Lurching on to the verandah, I was just in time to arrest another volley. As I leaned over the railing an old fat Kaffir woman on the far side of the wall below, attired in a dingy blouse and skirt, with a red handkerchief knotted round her head, was hoisting herself upright, a handful of stones in each fist.

'What the ——' I raised a warning arm.

On seeing me she grunted, dropped her missiles, turned about with remarkable celerity, and scuttled up the glade.

'What on earth are you doing?' I called out.

Disregarding my presence, she hobbled on; beyond the withered orange tree she stopped and, still presenting her back view, proceeded to oscillate its most prominent area in a manner that, as I was turning to run down the stairs, brought me to a halt in astonishment.

A surreptitious glance over her shoulder having assured her of my attention, she bent down; lifting the loose end of her blouse, she extracted a piece of paper from her waistband, slipped it under a flat stone, and shuffled rapidly towards the bushes by the path.

'Hi!' I shouted. 'Hold on — Wait!' I rushed down the steps.

But by the time I had thrown my legs

across the wall she had vanished. Dashing up the slope, I continued to call on her to stop; but, after a few yards, I slowed down. The undergrowth was thick on either side; if she wanted to hide it would be a troublesome business to dislodge her. As I was starting to shout again I paused: glancing at my watch, I saw that the hour was close on seven o'clock; old Timms had an office in the building — he or his workmen might appear at any moment. Puzzled, suddenly alarmed, I darted back to the foot of the path and, locating the stone, lifted it to one side.

Underneath was a piece of notepaper folded twice; opening it, I saw some lines written in pencil. 'I cannot come — any more,' was scrawled across the center; below had been added, 'Promise to do nothing. Darling, I swear to see you again.'

With my heart growing chill in my breast I stared at the barely legible words. A haze gathered before my eyes. Last night's scene, vividly black and white in its moonlight, sprang out like a photographic slide cast on a sheet. Again I felt in my limbs the terror with which that faceless, shouting apparition had filled the room — the dreadful paralysis that attends the uprush of the nightmare world within us.

And I had run away.... Suddenly (it seemed but an echo from the moment of my flight) I heard myself groan. Shivering in the hot, early sunshine, my face burning, I turned towards my quarters.

Fortunately I had little time in which to think. On reaching the lower verandah I found a messenger from the head of the engineering staff awaiting me. Rain had fallen during the previous twenty-four hours throughout the District; emergency gangs were proceeding forthwith to complete various road and bridge works. I was required to issue the necessary tools and equipment with the utmost possible despatch.

When, after gulping down a cup of scalding cocoa, I hurried across to the Departmental Store, the yard was already crowded with natives and colored foremen. Timms had opened the doors; picks, shovels, wheelbarrows and other implements were being stacked along the outside walls, while a couple of assistant engineers were wandering about testing surveying instruments and unearthing chains and rods. Everybody seemed to be in a bad temper after the holiday, and a number of the blacks were obviously still half-drunk.

The ensuing hours remain in my mind as a hubbub of orders, chattering, and rows in Dutch and Kaffir — interrupted by comprehensive blasphemies in English regarding the alleged condition of theodolites and dumpy-levels — and the automatic drone of my own voice as I reeled off to Timms from lists before me the categories and numbers of each issue. Endless delays occurred; gangs arrived under strength, to be thrust on one side while distracted foremen were hounded off in search of recruits; tools were found to be missing or damaged; Baluka, towering and scornful, marched through the rabble, bringing contradictory instructions from the office.

The morning passed. Timms's servant appeared with some luncheon, which Timms insisted on my sharing with him. Amid dust, heat, glare, and a suffocating odor of black humanity we ate, checking our entries between mouthfuls; then we began again.

The sun was setting when at length I slammed my books and leaned back in my chair. The last of the gangs had vanished an hour or so before; an aspect of squalid peace, suggesting the aftermath of a riot, had descended upon the yard.

Timms removed his hat and, producing a pocket mirror (his constant companion), examined himself admiringly and wiped his brow. 'It's done all the sweating it's going to do, for one day, that has!' he remarked. Lighting his pipe, he regarded me benevolently. 'You ain't looking any too much up to the mark, yourself.'

I started. My brain had suddenly relaxed; against the dusty gloom of the far wall I had caught a glimpse of a macabre pointing figure....

'You ain't been for some time, have you?' pursued my neighbor.

'Oh, I don't know — yes, I'm all right,' I replied listlessly.

'That's what you say. Well, I've been keeping my eye on you since you went into them quarters.'

I looked up quickly.

'Yes. And do you know what you want?' He beamed at me. 'You want ——'

I scrambled to my feet. I was familiar with Timms's prescriptions; their sameness was only equalled by their impropriety. Snatching up my ledgers, I made for the gate. 'I'm off to have a bath,' I shouted. 'Good night!'

But when I had deposited the books in the deserted office and locked away my receipts I nearly ran back to the yard on the off-chance of finding him still there. A passionate desire for company suddenly overwhelmed me — old Timms's or anybody's; even to the point of letting myself in, if need be, for a tour (to which I had a long-standing invitation) of his dubious haunts.

But before I reached the door the inclination passed. I was too tired; and besides — the idea became immediately nauseating. 'I would rather die,' I muttered drearily. Slowly I mounted to my quarters and, after some aimless moments, threw myself on the bed. But there my weariness left me. I lay staring out of the door — at a vista of illimitable hours.... 'I swear to see you again,' she had said. But when? What would happen — What *was* happening — in the meantime? 'Promise to do nothing.' I laughed bitterly. What was I likely to do? The only thing I had done was to run away. I found a sort of perverse pleasure in dwelling on that. After all I had done what she wanted.... Would I ever be able to forget those pointing fingers? My limbs twitched, with a groan I shut my eyes. Always I had thought of her as a victim, but now ——

I jumped up — that way lay thoughts that would drive me mad. I stumbled to the door and shouted for Baluka.

Getting no reply, I ran down the stairs in search of him. It was nearly seven; my one idea now was to have a bath and go to the inn. He would be somewhere about.

On reaching the front verandah I saw him at the far end. He had apparently finished cleaning out the office rooms and was standing motionless by a pillar. It was one of his idiosyncrasies that, in intervals of leisure, instead of squatting on his heels like other natives, he would retire to a distance and either pace slowly to and fro or station himself in complete immobility, his hand on his hip, staring before him.

So deep was his reverie that he did not hear my approach. He stood facing the ridge, from which the last glow of the sunset was fading. Following the direction of his gaze, I saw, with a tightening of the heart, a thin column of smoke rising from among the trees. An irresistible impulse overtook me; stepping beside him, I pointed.

'Baluka, you have lived here long.' I spoke in Dutch. 'Tell me, what is it that is there?'

For some instants I thought he had not understood. Then I saw that his fierce, bloodshot eyes were fixed on the smoke; in silence he watched the ascending wreaths. Abruptly he raised his arm; an incomprehensible murmur issued from his lips, and died away. With a gesture alien and startling in its aspect of mournful solemnity he spat into the bushes below.

My evening at the inn began in a state of nervous and physical exhaustion which speedily developed into feverish excitement. I was determined to forget. For the first time since I had resorted to the place I followed the example of most of my neighbors at table and drank whisky instead of the beverage which gave its name to the meal. As I was normally abstemious the effects were immediate. I plunged from talk into argument and — after the second or third glass — found myself involved in a series of disputes that began to draw unfavorable attention from the older men present. I was hazily aware that some of these were casting black looks in my direction, but the sullen streak in me had come to the surface; after all, a row was as good a means to oblivion as any other....

Disturbances of a more or less innocuous sort were not infrequent in that room. Filson's — the establishment was always known by the name of its proprietor — had a reputation for attracting company which, if not exactly disreputable, was locally regarded as 'tough.'

Its main elements might be described as 'horsey,' being composed, for the most part, of ex-sergeants and troopers of one or other of the South African police forces who, on their return to civilian life, had gravitated either as dealers or hangers-on to the only trade for which they had any qualifications. The fact that King George's Town was a headquarters of both the Cape Mounted Rifles and Cape Police, as well as the center of a large farming community, resulted in a steady buying and selling of Basutoland ponies, walers, and horseflesh generally; and Filson's bar had become a rendezvous for the type of person that is found on the outskirts of that industry all the world over.

A retired army 'vet,' who looked like an out-at-the-elbows cavalry officer, sat at the head of the table next a so-called gentleman-jockey from Johannesburg, a man with a string of high-sounding names and an evil, corpse-like face. These two formed the nucleus of the horse-dealing group, which on that particular night was augmented by a couple of bookmakers from Port Elizabeth who had turned up for the previous day's races. The rest of the company was less homogeneous. Opposite me was a Cockney dentist with a cast in his eye, whose efforts to establish a practice in the town were handicapped by the rumor that one of his lady patients at Durban, whence he had recently arrived, had brought him into court for making improper advances while she was recovering from the effects of laughing-gas. Beside him lounged an old up-country trader who had got into trouble with the authorities for persistent contravention of the liquor-selling laws, and now kept a tobacco store in the Market Square. The occupant of the chair on my left (between whom and the dentist opposite I was dividing my altercations) was a red-haired youth attached to the local paper.

That our wrangling failed to end in blows was mainly due to my neighbor on the other side, a middle-aged man, probably the most respectable of Filson's boarders. A former De Beer's 'guard,' he was now a partner in the firm of sanitary contractors whose vehicles, engaged on their lawful but odoriferous occasions, scattered terror among pedestrians in the early hours. He had led a roving life and, in his unassuming way, was a good talker. My liking for him was increased by the fact that, as an enthusiastic botanist (a circumstance not without irony, his occupational sobriquet being of course 'Violets') he held Mr. Bentinck and his monographs on South African flora in high esteem. He was an unusually handsome fellow, with a curling golden mustache and magnificent shoulders. Even in that rather rough crowd his sedate, middle-class integrity exacted respect. Save for some inevitable chaff — kept well within limits — regarding his professional duties, no one attempted to take liberties with him.

On this occasion, seeing how matters were heading, he exerted himself to divert my attention; and in the course of our talk, casually replaced the cork in the whisky bottle standing between us, and transferred the latter to the window ledge behind. I have no natural turn for drinking, and, for the time being, under his good-humored influence I quieted down.

With his departure at the close of the meal my recollections become somewhat blurred. I suppose the liquor I had consumed was in process of 'dying' in me. I remember getting up while the other men were drifting in twos and threes out of the door, feeling suddenly dizzy, and relapsing into my chair. After several attempts I managed to tilt it and myself backward against the wall; rather sick but pulling obstinately at a Cuban cheroot (another new departure for me), I stared dully before me.

Through its smoke the now deserted room assumed a more than usually sordid aspect. It was a long, narrow place opening off the bar, lit by a couple of glaring unshaded lamps suspended from the ceiling. Save for a rickety cottage piano in the far corner, its only furniture consisted of deal tables placed end to end, covered with stained oilcloth, and the empty chairs scattered down either side. The matchwood walls were bare except for grimy colored prints from Christmas numbers of the *Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News* pinned to the boards, and a cluster of faded snapshots of naked Kaffir women by the door.

Two black-boys came in from the kitchen and, with a deafening racket, began clearing away the litter of plates, tumblers, Worcestershire-sauce bottles and tarnished cruet-stands. On reaching my end of the table they redoubled their noise, with the obvious intention of getting rid of me. But the sullen mood had descended again; I lashed out at the shins of one who came too close — nearly bringing myself to the floor in the effort — and, pouring some more whisky into my glass, signed to them to leave the bottle.

It was after their final exit that I became aware of the presence of some one else in the room. Near the far wall a figure was lolling at the table. Cautiously, my balance being precarious, I twisted round; owing to my partially fuddled state a moment elapsed before I recognized the profile. Then I sank back; it was only Rashleigh.

No one could claim that the intellectual standards current at Filson's were of a lofty order, but, even there, abnormal stupidity made its mark; and for that quality Rashleigh, in the idiom of those days, 'took the cake.' His age must have been about thirty, but it was generally said that he could barely read or write. To a casual observer like myself the most noticeable thing about him was the fact that he looked so obviously a gentleman. Among the gang with which he consorted (he acted as a sort of understrapper to Tatham, the vet) his origin was as unmistakable as is that of a pair of well-cut breeches on the legs of a stable-boy. There was something unpleasant in seeing a fellow of his type at the beck and call of a man who was notoriously not only a cad but a crook; but, although given to outbursts of violent temper, he was amazingly biddable, and seemed quite unconscious of anything derogatory in his status. No doubt his denseness contributed to this, and military discipline — he had served in the ranks of more than one irregular corps — may have reënforced some natural strain of fidelity to any one whom he regarded for the time being as his official superior. There were about him, indeed, many of the characteristics of a big, rather attractive dog. But unfortunately for himself he added another, exclusively human — he drank far too much.

His face was disfigured by a wound received in the first Matebele War, which had crushed and flattened one side of his jaw, giving a curious, at moments tragic twist to his expression. Now, as he leaned forward in his chair, his head supported on a powerful forearm (like myself he was in shirt-sleeves), he presented an appearance of somber vacuity. A whisky bottle stood at his elbow; between drinks he smoked listlessly.

Thoughts of a kind must have intruded, however, for on the appearance of Filson, the proprietor, at the door leading from the bar, he hailed the latter with an air of enthusiastic relief. 'Hullo, Filjack,' he called out, signaling with his pipe. 'Come and have a drink.'

The newcomer paused on the threshold. 'I was wanting a word with you, Rasher,' he said, his glance flitting in my direction. I stared without a sign. In so far as I thought of him at all, I disliked Filson more than any one in the place. I had no intention of moving to suit his convenience.

He scowled back; after a moment's hesitation he turned to the other and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. 'Come on in here.'

Rashleigh hoisted himself up obediently, but, failing to extricate his feet from among the legs of the furniture, dropped back with a crash. At the impact — he must have been drinking more heavily than I had guessed — his mood changed. 'Go to blazes,' he rejoined sulkily. Lifting the bottle, he felt for his glass. 'If you want to jaw you can jolly well come and jaw here.'

Filson disappeared into the bar, returning an instant later with a tumbler. Eyeing me as he passed, he made his way round the end of the table and pulled up a seat beside the other.

I turned away. His entry had roused me. Lowering the front legs of my chair to the floor, I refilled my glass. Presently his whispering and muttering began to get on my nerves; finishing my drink, I poured out another; then I sat round and stared at him.

On some occasion I had heard Mr. Carleton, speaking in his official capacity, refer to Filson as 'a thoroughly bad fellow.' As I watched him now the description seemed to me very apt. His sallow face, thrust close to Rashleigh's, was alive with furtive animation (he was evidently trying to persuade the latter on some point), his colorless, red-rimmed eyes snapped, the lines on his forehead twitched spasmodically, from below his unkempt, drooping mustache a trickle of saliva glistened on his chin.

He was said to have served an apprenticeship to a London west-end tailor, and there was in his manner a combination of cringing and insolence which a person of his temperament might very well assimilate in such surroundings. Like most of his boarders, he had drifted, on his arrival in Africa, into one of the up-country corps, but anything less military than his appearance it would be difficult to imagine. At all seasons — even in the hottest weather — he clung to a pair of reach-me-down heather-mixture trousers sagging low on his stomach and upheld by a belt, above which a blue serge waistcoat, rucked up and greasy, displayed a thin steel watchchain hanging in long loops. He never wore a jacket; his hairy forearms protruded from the sleeves of a dingy flannel shirt permanently rolled up to the elbow. Thus clad, his lanky figure slouching about the inn lent an added touch of disreputability to the place. It is only fair to add, however, that he was not without personality of a kind, and he kept order in circumstances where smarter-looking proprietors might have failed. There was a sort of underhand formidableness about him — something at the same time slinking and lethal — that caught the attention.

He seemed, at the moment, to be having rather an uphill time with Rashleigh. The subject at issue, whatever it was, required prolonged explanation — a form of intercourse to which the latter was constitutionally averse. 'What?' 'What?' 'Say that again.' 'What's the sense of that?' 'Don't talk so fast.'

'You've said that before; I've heard all that before.' The interruptions became progressively more querulous.

'Why can't you listen, Rasher?' expostulated Filson peevishly.

Rashleigh pushed out his arms in a harassed gesture, thereby upsetting his glass. 'What the blazes do you suppose I've been doing for the last half-hour?' He searched for his handkerchief, and dabbed tipsily at the cloth and the front of his trousers. 'And look here, don't call me "Rasher" unless I tell you to.'

'Well, what about you calling me "Filjack"?' objected his companion.

'That's different.... All I tell you is, don't do it!'

'All right, have it your own way.' Filson poured out some more whisky for him and, leaning closer, began again.

'For God's sake, don't breathe all over me!' burst out Rashleigh, after a moment.

'Well, I've got to breathe somewhere, haven't I?' retorted the other, his temper getting the better of him.

Rashleigh considered this. 'No....' he said at length, in unconscious plagiarism of a celebrated rejoinder. 'Not n-necessarily.' He tried to scrape a match on the still damp oilcloth and, failing, flung it on the floor. 'You listen to *me* now ——' After a couple of preliminary heaves he swayed to his feet. 'Do you know what the Colonel said to me, once?

I was his orderly for two years, and I'm not likely to forget... You don't catch me forgetting anything he said ——' His voice tailed off; a look of incongruous and maudlin grief passed into his face.

Filson stood up impatiently. 'Well, what did he say?'

'He said — I can hear him now ——' The other jerked himself suddenly to attention. 'He said, "Rashleigh, when any one starts letting off a lot of long words at you, don't take any notice. If it's an order it won't be a lot of long words: if it isn't — it doesn't matter."' With a stagger the speaker resumed his normal attitude and, shoving a chair out of the way, pushed past his companion.

'Well, I don't see much in that,' responded the latter. 'All the Colonel meant — he was my Colonel as much as yours — was that while you were his orderly ——'

'Don't start mixing yourself up with what Fane meant — talking to me!' Rashleigh paused by the end of the table. 'You think I'm tight, but watch out what you say! You watch out what you say about — about the Colonel.' His voice steadied itself threateningly.

'I'm not likely to say anything wrong about Fane,' rejoined Filson pacifically; 'you know that. All I mean is ——'

They had reached my table; Rashleigh lurched against it as he passed.

'One moment — excuse me!' I stumbled to my feet, breathless, my ears singing. 'Excuse me — do you mean Colonel Rowley Fane?'

They halted. Rashleigh spun round unsteadily; finding my glance fixed on him, he straightened himself. I had a sudden misgiving: was he as drunk as I had thought — was it I, perhaps... ?

'What's that you said?' he demanded.

My lips had gone dry. 'I asked whether it was Colonel — Colonel Rowley Fane you were speaking of,' I stammered. Already a chill was rising through me; amid the tumult dying in my brain I heard a beloved voice: 'Promise to do nothing.' What was I doing... ?

A seemingly endless pause was broken by Rashleigh (who was rarely heard to swear). 'What the bloody hell business is that of yours?'

I looked down. 'I only wanted to know,' I muttered.

'He's been flapping his jaw all evening,' put in Filson malevolently. 'I heard him from the kitchen. In another shake of a donkey's leg I'd have had him out of it!'

'Shut up, Filjack.' The other moved forward; folding his arms, he balanced himself on the edge of the table. 'Why did you want to know?'

I remained silent.

'Answer, hang you!'

'Just because I did.' I heard my heart beating.

'Why?'

'Because — I did.'

'Ask him what he wanted to know *for*, Rasher,' prompted Filson.

'What do you want to know *for?*'

'Because — because I wanted to know what had become of him,' I said desperately.

Rashleigh slipped to his feet; grasping the table in his muscular hands, he wrenched it to one side, leaving a triangular passage between us. Squeezing past the corner, he stepped in front of me. His sunburnt, twisted face was flaming, his blue eyes alight with some fierce suspicion.

My chair fell over with a crash behind me.

'You young swine,' he stuttered. 'I've — I've heard things about you. Not my business — nothing to do with me. That's your own lookout.... But if you think you're going to start any of your gaol-bird sneaking here ——'

I leapt back: a terrific upper cut from his right fist grazed my chin. I managed to guard his left and, before he recovered, hit him on the mouth. But that was almost the end of it, so far as I was concerned; I was no match for Rashleigh. We had both been drinking and, apart from any other consideration, he was infinitely more inured to the effects of alcohol than I was. I have a recollection of a blow on the side of my jaw that brought me to the ground; of climbing up, not much the worse; of getting in a successful hook to his left ear; of going down again — this time heavily. I remember struggling to my feet, but thereafter all is a blank save for a final, double-shotted crash.

I came back to consciousness seeing trousers arched above me; something cold was against my forehead; the trousers and I, with the floor, were whirling round a bucket. I felt myself wrenched upwards. Filson — materialized apparently from nowhere — had his arm round me. We floated across the bar and through the door. Rashleigh was being sick on the step.... Seemingly for hours we wandered through darkness, embraced like lovers. A voice said, 'Damn you, lift your feet,' and we mounted endless steps. There was an interlude of hideous violence (my legs must have got entangled in the top railing or stuck in the doorway). Then a sudden quiet: falling. A swimming blackness....

CHAPTER XVI

Of next morning's events I heard later from various sources.

Baluka found me lying across the bed, my jacket thrown on the floor, my face contused and swollen, the blanket and front of my shirt spattered with blood.

As an old-time expert in scenes of carnage he appears to have been helpful but not unduly moved. He lifted me on to the pillow, took off my boots, and then proceeded with his customary duties of filling my bath and preparing breakfast. On his return an hour or so later, finding me still unconscious, he went downstairs and stationed himself outside the office door; when Grey arrived he reported my condition, adding that in his opinion I was 'talking with spirits' — becoming delirious, in fact.

Grey accompanied him to my quarters, surveyed me from the doorway (I presented 'a beastly sight,' he informed me afterwards, in supercilious tones) and, deciding that I was suffering from the effects of a drunken brawl, was for leaving me to sleep them off. Baluka, however, reaffirmed his view as to my state, and, prodding me experimentally, induced an unintelligible outcry. Grey, more disgusted than concerned, departed below and, after opening and passing out the day's mail, sent Baluka to look at me again; learning that I was still unconscious, he despatched a message to the medical officer.

As it happened I must have more or less recovered my wits just as Dr. Niven arrived, for my first recollections of the morning are of fingers wandering exploringly over my skull and of stertorous breathing, redolent of nicotine, rising and falling about me.

I felt myself lowered on to the pillow; opening my eyes, I hazily recognized a round-shouldered back. My visitor pulled forward a chair, and, transferring his fingers to my wrist, hauled from a pocket a fat silver watch.

I was surprised at his presence, but vaguely quite pleased. Dr. Niven and I were acquaintances of some standing. We had met soon after my arrival, and in circumstances that had established something in the nature of a bond between us.

He was what is called a 'character'; so much so indeed that Reserve society in King George's Town was — and had been for about twenty years — sharply divided as to whether his retention in his post (I forget how far, if at all, it was an official appointment) was a scandal or a credit to the community.

I never heard any one question his professional ability. It would have been rather absurd to do so, as he was probably the only doctor in the Colony who owned an international reputation. In his early days he had accompanied an expedition to the Congo, and his pioneer work in relation to sleeping-sickness and other African diseases (for which a distinguished career at Aberdeen, followed by research courses at various Continental universities, had prepared him) attracted the notice of Government medical departments in such European countries as possessed tropical dependencies. Thereafter he divided many years between the Equatorial Zone and the Cape, penetrating always farther among obscure tribes of the hinterland until, disabled by fever and privations, he would retreat south for varying periods to recruit his health and publish the results of his observations. Finally, after nearly dying on a two years' trip north of the Zambesi, he had settled — prematurely aged and, it was said, embittered by professional feuds — at King George's Town.

So much for the credit side; on the other there appeared at least one entry that had carried forward a disastrous balance against him throughout the years: he drank. His was not a case of the daily and nightly tippling indulged in by frequenters of places like Filson's; during months — sometimes for a period approaching a couple of years — he touched no liquor. Then, after an interlude of two or three days when his wrinkled, bearded face wore a look that frightened the Kaffir children as he passed on his rounds, he would abandon himself to weeks of continuous soaking. At such times he went about his work as if in a trance, unsteady on his legs, fuddled and dirty, but retaining an uncanny, as it seemed, automatic grasp on his technical efficiency.

Just when local feeling, voiced mainly in Reserve parlors and at informal gatherings round the church porch, had decided that 'something must really be done about Dr. Niven,' the cloud would lift. Still erratic as to his feet, and reeking of stale whisky, he was apt to herald his restoration by a brief phase of defiant jocularity. The actual turning point was marked by the appearance of a clean collar and dicky. Within twenty-four hours thereafter his gruff, ironic personality, decently clothed and in its right mind, would be in full control.

It was during the penultimate stage of his latest bout that we had met. In turning out of a side-path after a visit to a patient, he had managed to get the near wheel of his gig entangled with a gatepost. Apparently while leaning backward to see what had happened, he had overbalanced (the horse was young and restive) and rolled on to the path. I chanced to arrive on the scene just in time to seize the bridle and save the trap from being kicked to pieces. After quieting the animal and backing it clear of the obstruction I went to the doctor's assistance. He had been making abortive efforts to rise, and I feared I should have difficulty in hoisting him into the seat. But, once on his feet, he proved to be unexpectedly in command of his faculties. Motioning to me to stand by the step, and leaning his weight on my shoulder, he heaved himself into position with a skill obviously born of experience and a familiarity with the laws of applied dynamics.

'Laddie, at a juncture the like of this it's aye the pedal extremities that are the unruly members wi' a Scotsman,' he remarked composedly. Taking the reins, he lifted the whip from the floor. 'Jump in beside me. The least I can do is to give ye a lift.'

We were less than half a mile from my quarters, but I was still uncertain as to how far he was capable of taking care of himself, so I slipped round the back of the gig and climbed in.

During our short drive he was quite at his ease. He asked my name and inquired at once if I were related to the 'auld Governor.' On learning the connection, his friendliness became demonstrative (he was passing through the garrulous phase referred to). It appeared that he had attended my great-uncle on a shooting trip to the borders of the Kalahari Desert, and he professed eternal indebtedness to the latter for official support in connection with one of his many scientific vendettas. 'He was a grand man, yon — a real gentleman,' he observed weightily. 'If it hadna been for him and his influence there was once when thae

German Teufelsdröckhs would have had me under. Him and me aye got on fine.'

When we turned into the Reserve Road he pulled up at the path leading to my quarters.

'Well, sir,' he put his hand on mine, 'I'm obliged to you. We'll be meeting again, I make no doubt. You'll have no need for my professional attention, I trust, but that'll aye be at your disposal, and welcome, if the occasion arise — for the old Lord's sake as well as for your own.'

Seeing that I was hesitating to make a move, he gave me a wry look that had a touch of dignity in it. 'No, no, young gentleman, you can leave me. I'll come to no harm while I sit here; and my servant — that's a better man than me though his face is black — will be waiting. Good-night to you.'

I discovered later that his speech varied with his mood. At ordinary times it was strongly — to me often incomprehensibly — Doric, but when it suited him to do so he could employ a locution as correct as any to be heard south of the Tweed, marked only by a broad, characteristic intonation.

In the course of the following months he used to make a point of drawing up his gig 'to pass the time of day,' as he expressed it, when I encountered him on the road. He never invited any one to the dreary house by the river, where he lived in bachelor solitude; but there was an air of genial intimacy in his greeting on such occasions that placed our acquaintanceship on a footing of its own. Once or twice after matters had gone wrong with me, I fancied I detected in his glance a thoughtful, semi-professional regard, but he was fundamentally reserved, and no doubt my manner had not been calculated to invite anything in the nature of an advance.

Now, as he tucked away his watch, his eye met mine with a quizzical stare. 'So it's you that has been to the wars this time, laddie?'

Dazed as I was, a disjointed memory of the previous night's events had visited me an instant before. I nodded vaguely.

'Weel, there's no much wrong, but there might have been! The chiel that gave ye yon dunt on the chin should have had the gumption to see that there wasna a chair or a table, or whatever it was, behind ye. It's that that's done it: ye've had a wee concussion.'

I nodded again, but with less comprehension (what was a 'dunt'?). A wall seemed to have erected itself round the inside of my head while he spoke. My lids drooped.

He got to his feet. 'Just bide where ye are. There's no need to have ye moved — for the present, anyway. Timms, the clerk-of-works, will come in and give ye yer medicine — he was waiting on me when I arrived to see if he could do anything. But mind: no talking to him or any one till I give ye leave. Yon old sinner Baluka will attend to the rest. He's outside the now — I'll have a word wi' him.'

I have a dim recollection thereafter of being undressed, and of Baluka lifting me like a feather on to the mattress — the operations being directed in an outlandish tongue that sounded to me like some variant of broad Scotch, but was presumably Dr. Niven's Zulu.

The ensuing twenty-four hours I passed in sleep, save when the faces of Timms and Baluka, like those of ministering fiends, intruded on my consciousness urging me to drink from the glasses or cups. Dr. Niven looked in late in the evening. 'Ye're going on fine,' he said, after feeling my pulse and adjusting my bandages. 'We'll have ye about again in a jiffy.'

But I was not to get off so easily. Next day, although the discomfort in my head had lessened, I felt hot and curiously oppressed. When the doctor appeared, after a single glance at me, he produced a thermometer.

'Humph!' He scratched his beard as he examined the instrument. 'Ye've a touch of the fever. It's no much, but ——' He stood for a moment thinking. 'By rights I should pack ye off to hospital.' He paused and looked at me doubtfully. 'Ye'll be talking nonsense, as like as not, before the night's past.'

Through the woolly heat of my brain his words reached a long-dormant terror.

'No! No!' I sat up in a panic. 'You

mustn't let me! I mustn't! You mustn't let any one ——'

'Wheest, man! Get down wi' ye!' He put a hand on my shoulder and forced me back to the pillow. 'Lie still!'

'You don't understand ——' I gripped his fingers.

'Mebbe aye and mebbe no,' he said soothingly. 'But if ye think ye're the first I've had to do with that's feared of talking havers when he's no himself, I can answer for it that ye're nothing of the kind! Lie quiet, and we'll see what can be done.' With an admonitory pat on my arm he went to the doorway. 'Baluka!' He beckoned along the verandah and stepped outside.

A minute or two later he returned. 'It's all arranged, so ye needna fash yerself. Baluka'll bring his blanket here for the night. That'll suit fine. There's naught to worry over — it's just a wee goof what they call the camp fever hereabout. Ye've been run down for some time, or I'm much mistaken, and that — wi' yon clout on the head coming on the top of it — has done it. If ye do what ye're told and lie quiet, ye'll be free of the baith o' them in three days. Let's have a look at ye.'

Seating himself on the edge of the bed, he unwound my bandages. 'It's a mercy ye've got on the right side of that auld savage of yours. I've known him near thirty years. He was a figure to frighten the French with in those days, I can tell ye! He's no human, really ——' the doctor paused to fasten a safety-pin, 'no as we whites understand the word, anyway; but he has grand beast qualities. Ye might go farther and fare worse than have him for a nurse, once he's taken a fancy to ye. There now: ye're fixed up. I'll be in first thing in the morning.'

Whether it is a general experience that the sensations and images of delirious hours are apt to recur to the memory I do not know; presumably it is largely a question of their intensity. In my own case, at all events, the impressions of that night remain vivid after more than a quarter of a century. Strangely enough, although recent events had so profoundly affected me, it was the past that invaded and battened upon my brain. No doubt Dr. Niven's remark had touched a chord the very existence of which I had forgotten, but whose vibrations had haunted every thought of sleep during my sentence and in the first weeks of freedom. Now, as the fever mounted, the old terror awoke. Baluka's immense form, wrapped in his blanket, stretched full-length by the door, became suddenly to my eyes rigid, expectant, attentive....

I knew I mustn't speak.

Where was I? What was this light behind me? Of course! — it was the candle: Dr. Niven had placed it on a chair by the head of the bed. Why was it so dim? The glass made it dim —

that filthy opaque glass that covered the niche for the jet between the cells.... Between the *what?* I sat up. With a growing, unspeakable horror I recognized the bare boards, the whitewash, the lines of the trestle-bed on which I lay.... Yes. I was back in cell B 4/49.

I must have screamed. Baluka, towering, lengthening until he seemed to reach the ceiling, stood beside me. A glass was held to my lips; with inexpressible relief I felt his thin, cold fingers on my wrist — the disproportionately tiny hand (I remembered) of the highborn Zulu.... I sank back. Baluka was real.... And he was the strongest man in Africa. He wouldn't let them....

But who were these, clustering on the threshold, craning in their heads from the darkness, watching? What had I been saying? I must have been saying something because — there! He was hammering with his key on the door (not that inexplicable opening where the people were) — the real, iron door. 'Stop your row in there! Get off to sleep, or I'll come in to you!' I held my breath. Had he gone? You could never tell because they wore felt soles.... I relaxed on to the pillow. The walls narrowed round me. I was choking. The smell — it was a million times worse than usual tonight: that awful, faint compound of stale bread, disinfectant-soap, and urine. Prison smell.... I was going to scream again. Had he gone? *No.* The key was turning — the slow, soft, double click; a chain was rattling: he had brought the Chief Warder — the man with the staring eyes.... 'I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I won't do it any more — please. Not the Punishment Cell....'

Baluka again — murmuring reassuringly, bending over me. 'Not human, really' — but *strong*.... I clung to his hand.

It was not until the early hours of the following night that the fever dropped; then I slept deeply, awaking late the next day, clear in the head but very weak. During the ensuing twenty-four hours I dozed on the margin of consciousness, with long intervals of slumber.

Dr. Niven expressed high satisfaction with my progress on his arrival the next morning. 'Ye can sit up in the chair,' he announced. 'But no stravaiging about, mind; and the less talking ye do the better. Yon nincompoop Grey, with his sleekit hair, was asking the now when ye would be back to duty. I tell't him to-morrow, mebbe, or the day after; but that he could see ye any time for a minute or two, if it had to do with the office. So he'll be up in half an hour. Work's work, and I'm thinking ye'll have to keep on the right side of the folk downstairs for a while after this.' With which remark he took his departure.

When Grey appeared I saw at once that the doctor's warning had not been given without reason. Immaculate in his well-cut flannels, my superior lounged stiffly in the doorway.

After a frigid inquiry as to my health he passed to some official matters. Then came a brief silence. 'Er—the chief wishes to see you as soon as you are about again.'

'Oh.' With an effort I looked up. 'Do you know what about?'

His glance traveled over my head. 'Well — apart from anything else ——' he paused, 'rows at a place like Filson's aren't exactly the sort of thing to commend themselves to him. This affair of yours has got about — people outside are talking of it — and, to be frank,' he halted on the threshold and met my eye, 'it isn't going to make your — er — position any easier here. It was all right as long as you kept to yourself; but,' he stared contemptuously, 'once you've started this sort of thing with a crowd like that, you can see for yourself where it's likely to end. I don't know what the chief has in mind—one never does with him—but if I were you I should think things over.'

As his footsteps receded along the verandah I sank back in my deck-chair. 'Think things over.' Suddenly I felt I couldn't. I couldn't. I had scarcely used my brain for days — ages it seemed to me. Now, when I tried to bring it to bear on this latest situation it slipped, as it were, from my grasp. It was not a question merely of my feeling weak; I felt — in the sense of 'thinking' — nothing at all. I was conscious only of an immense, threatening greyness....

I must have dozed. Baluka came in and made me some tea. Rain was falling. While I had lain unconscious the turn of the season had come. Thunder muttered in the distance; as dusk approached a stormy chill blew in from the doorway. With an effort I managed to drag my chair across the floor. A little later I lit the candle.

An overwhelming loneliness took hold of me. There was nothing left. Nothing to try for — nothing to be faithful to.... What was the use of trying to think? The facts were enough.

The rug dropped from my knees. I might as well get back to bed....

Abruptly I paused — my hands on the chair-rests. The rain had stopped: what was that noise below — by the wall? I sat forward with a jerk. A swift rush of footsteps sounded on the stairs — on the threshold behind. As I struggled to rise I felt two arms about me, against my forehead was crushed a cheek, warm, fragrant, wet with tears.

CHAPTER XVII

'DEAR — dear one.' My love clasped me to her; against my face I felt her breast rising and falling, her heart beating. 'I've just heard.... It nearly killed me when I knew that you were ill. Don't speak; you mustn't. I won't tire you. I only want — to be near you.' Her voice died away, she dropped on her knees beside me.

'But ——' I mumbled.

'No — please.' Her lips caressed my hair. 'I can feel,' she sobbed suddenly, 'how — weak you are. It frightens me so....' Her embrace relaxed, she pressed her cheek against mine.

'I'm all right,' I protested. 'I want ——'

'Darling — what?'

'To look at you.'

Slowly she loosened her hold and sank back on her heels. 'I've been crying,' she whispered.

Always, until that moment, I had seen her in summer attire — in gowns of white and faded heliotrope or blue; now she was dressed in unrelieved black. Her bodice, of some thin, glistening material, was cut to a point in front, her sleeves reached to her elbows; round her neck she wore the chain and sapphire seal I had given her. In the light of the candle on the table above her, against the snowy background of the wall, she presented an indescribably moving aspect of grief and brilliance. Her hair, sprinkled with rain-drops, caught the beams from the flame in ripples and waves of gold. In her agitation her cheeks showed a vivid carmine on the shell-like whiteness of her skin, matching her scarlet, parted lips. Within the shadows of their lashes her eyes shone dark with tears.

'I've only heard,' she repeated, a hand pressed to her side, 'only an hour ago.'

'But how — who told you?' I gazed at her stupidly.

'Baluka — your servant.'

'Baluka?' I sat forward. 'How did ——'

'Oh, my dear ——' She bent over me. 'We have so little time — I must go so soon. Don't let us talk of that. I am thinking only of you — of you being ill, here, alone. I can't bear it.' Her voice broke.

'But I'm all right — really.' I felt for her hand. 'The doctor says I'll be about again in a couple of days, and — anyway, nothing matters now that you are here. Nothing.'

Her arms tightened around me; I felt a tremor pass through them. 'Dear,' she whispered, her breath caught in a sob. 'Try, try to think of me as always here — always being with you. I know that other people have said such things, but, with me it is so true. I try to do what I have to do,' again she shivered. 'I try.... But all my thoughts, all my love, all my — feelings,' her voice sank, 'are yours. Always, always. There is not an hour when I do not think of you — not a moment when, in my heart, however busy or sad I may be, I am not longing to think of you: to picture you in my arms, like this....' She held me closer. 'And, dear, listen: it will be so till I die. It is not just that I have cared since the night we met — that I have prayed that every thought, every feeling should be as you would wish them to be — there is something else.' She paused, her tears fell on my face. 'I am not like other women.... I wish, desperately, that I had told you the truth about — about myself. Then you would understand. I was afraid; and now it is too late. I cannot tell it with you in my arms.... Some day — quite soon, you will know why.'

'Sweetheart ——' I tried to raise myself.

'Dear, wait. I have almost finished.... Now that it is almost here — the moment for us' — I felt her body tremble against mine — 'for us to part, I am glad to be as I am. I am glad that no man will look at me — will ever want to touch me. You will know the truth — the only person who understands the facts will tell you all he has told me — but to every one else I shall be an outcast. And you' — she kissed me on the mouth — 'however lonely you may be, you will remember that no lips will touch mine, no head lie where yours is lying, from now until I die.'

Her words reached me through a trance of pain. The emotions of the past minutes had been too much for my weakened state. With a deadly chill in my brain I felt her stir, but I could not speak.

Suddenly, as I clung to her, she raised her head, her breathing ceased.

I heard nothing but the beating of her heart against my cheek.

Gently, with a swift movement, she leaned forward and blew out the candle.

Footsteps sounded on the top of the stairs, shuffled across the verandah. Clasped in each other's arms, we stared over our shoulders. The storm had passed; against a sky of stars a figure was framed in the doorway.

'Are ye asleep, laddie?'

Getting no reply, Dr. Niven (there was no mistaking his voice and outline) felt in his pocket. A match scraped, the flame sputtered and went out.

I felt my love's lips pressed upon mine, her breath on my cheek. 'Dear... Beloved one... good-bye....' Throwing her cloak about her, she slipped to her feet and across the floor; as she dashed over the threshold, brushing against the doctor's shoulder, her hood fell back; she vanished down the staircase, her telltale hair flashing in the starlight.

If ever the heart can be said to break, God knows mine was falling to pieces in my breast at that moment, yet as I craned over the arm of my chair, I watched with a sort of benumbed breathlessness.

Silhouetted against the night, matchbox in hand, his shoulders slewed round, his bandy legs straddled, Dr. Niven continued to regard the empty space behind him in petrified immobility.

At length he relaxed, but only to rush across the verandah; thrusting his head over the railing, he leaned into the darkness. Then, with a grunt that reached me where I sat, he turned towards the door.

Striking a match, as he entered, he held it aloft. After a quick glance round the room — at the bed, at me in my chair — he advanced to the table and lit the candle.

Bemused as I was, I was startled at the look on his face. Surprise — stupefaction — were there, but already they had given way to an increasing, grave concern. So deeply preoccupied was he that he seemed to have forgotten my existence. Blinking at the flame, he fingered the charred match-end, made as though to drop it into the candlestick, then, after another prolonged pause, returned slowly to the door and tossed it into the darkness. With his back to the room he stood motionless, staring in front of him.

I sank deeper in the chair, my eyelids drooped.

A boot scraped beside me. With a start I looked up. The doctor was standing over me, thermometer in hand. 'Here,' he said laconically. Closing my lips on the instrument, I gazed at him dully.

The seconds passed. Immersed in thought, he plucked at his scrubby, grizzled beard, his eyes bent on a point on the floor. My glance strayed from his greasy waterproof to his antiquated black tail-coat, fixing itself on the big diamond (a memento of Kimberley days in the eighties) incongruously pinned on a shabby satin tie of flaring blue picked out in white spots.

Just as I was slipping under the hypnotic influence of this combination he turned with a jerk; taking the instrument from my mouth, he held it to the light. 'Get back into your bed,' he said.

I was wearing my pajamas below an overcoat, so my preparations were soon completed.

As I sank on to the mattress Dr. Niven swung round from the window on the end wall where he had stationed himself. Pausing by the table, he glanced again at the thermometer. 'Ye'll bide where ye are to-morrow. Ye can dress and sit up, but no gadding about.'

'The chief wants to see me,' I muttered.

'Weel, he can want! Ye should have thought of that before. Thae——' he paused as though searching for a word, 'goings-on are no the thing to help ye in the state ye're in. A bairn would tell ye that.' He lifted the candlestick and moved to the chair by the bed.

Midway he paused and raised the light. 'What are ye greetin' for?' he demanded.

'Never mind.' I turned my face away.

'I'm thinking I'll have to mind, laddie.' At his tone I glanced round through the corners of my eyes. An odd change was visible in his countenance. It was as though, abruptly, he had reached a solution of some formidable perplexity. His expression was still grave, but the lines about his mouth were twitching with suppressed excitement. As if aware that he was betraying himself unduly he thrust a hand to his mustache. 'You and me will need to have a talk. No the night. Forbye the fact that ye're in no trim for anything of the kind, I'm no ready myself. Man, ye've fair staggered me — you and your affairs!' He regarded me with a dour curiosity. 'There's plenty that's Greek to me yet, but I'll tell ye this: if matters turn out to be as I'm thinking they are, I may have a surprise for ye!'

I twisted back towards the wall. Why didn't he go? My senses ached for darkness and silence — to recover in the torture of memory the clasp of her arms about me, the scent of her hair, the cadence of her voice....

Fingers encircled my wrist. 'Where's yon bottle I left with ye two nights ago?' An interlude of creaking boards followed. 'Here, drink this.' Dr. Niven held a glass to my lips. 'There ye are, my man.' I felt a pat on my arm. 'And to-morrow we'll mebbe be able to cheer ye up in spite of yerself. I canna get here till evening. Just bide where ye are.' The candle was blown out; unconsciousness, like a black shawl, dropped over me.

I awoke heavy and ill at ease to what was to be (I write the words in the spirit of apprehensive thankfulness that, as the years pass, must attend any such pronouncement) alike the darkest and, in its closing, the most lurid day of my life.

As I dragged myself, still dull with the effects of the opiate, to the table where Baluka had set my early tea, I caught sight of an envelope lying on the plate. Letters were rare events to me. Aunt Helen was my only correspondent. This communication had a business-like look. On turning it over I recognized the name of our family lawyers on the seal; puzzled and suddenly nervous, I tore the flap and drew out the enclosure. After a momentary glance at the clear legal script I half-rose in the chair, my hand fell with a crash among the dishes: Aunt Helen was dead.

In the nature of things all autobiography resolves itself into a matter of selection. The process seems to be largely automatic. Of the memories that are called up, that intrude, that hover doubtfully or boldly over the blurred edge which divides recollected fact from the accretions of time, it would be hard to say (I speak for myself) why this is utilized or that rejected. One has a purpose — perhaps merely a point of view; and the itch of artistry that attacks even the most modest of chroniclers accounts for much. But there are happenings from which, having once recorded them, the writer instinctively passes on. Poignant and momentous though they may have been in their impact, they are of a sort that belong to the common experience of mankind. The death of a beloved relative is one of these. Far from predicating a lack of sensibility — still less of imagination — the reticence induced by such an event is but a tribute to the understanding of the human heart, to its infinite acquaintance with grief.

In a sense, however, Aunt Helen had been more to me than the dearest of relations. Her long absences, the uncertainty that attended her brief incursions into my life, instead of dimming the aura of beauty and tenderness through which my childish eyes beheld her, had but added an incommunicable thrill to the tie established between us. My mother died when I was five — two years after she had passed out of my ken. It would be absurd to pretend that Aunt Helen took her place — the circumstances of her husband's career, apart from any other consideration, precluded that — but she kept alive in my heart the emotional qualities of the relationship. Amid the neglect, caprice, and evil of my upbringing I was always conscious of the existence of an enchanting being endowed with the mysterious attribute of 'caring for' me, who might appear at any moment from across the world, bringing gifts and laughter and the magic of a perfect comprehension. And when at these times, with the inexplicability of a fairy story, her dear presence was withdrawn, I did not feel wholly lost; for the essence of our bond was that however widely we might be parted she 'thought' of me and I was to 'think' of her, and that if I needed her she would come.

Things did not work out quite like that, of course; life is an enemy to all fidelities save those based on some mutual stake in the business of living. But the idea persisted, ever present on the background of my thoughts. And the earlier pages of this story tell how once and again Aunt Helen stepped between me and irrevocable disaster.

Now she was gone.... As I stared through the open door I felt suddenly breathless, numb — as if a vital constituent had been removed from the air. Turning, I slipped blindly across the floor and sank on my knees by the bed.

Then, and throughout the day which followed, it seems to me, in retrospect, that the specific quality of her influence came into its own. Always it had been her gift to bring comfort; now, in the darkest hours I had yet faced, when everything appeared to be slipping from beneath my feet, she made for me the refuge of an unalloyed sorrow. The convolutions of the brain are cunningly devised to accommodate suffering; the room was full of the anguish of my love's farewell — I was even acutely aware of Grey, like a messenger of Fate, trivial but menacing, in the doorway. But through the hot despair, above the clamor and distress of my heart there rose as it were the strophe and antistrophe of august mourning.

Mercifully the fever had lifted, I felt stronger physically than I had done since the scene at the inn. After I had swallowed some food at midday I was able to move about the room. As I paced the floor a sudden resolve formed in my mind: I would confide in Dr. Niven when he arrived that night. I was at the end of my tether. This latest blow had unmanned me at a moment when I needed all my faculties. For, with a determination born of blank misery, I vowed that — short of exposing her to peril — there was now no length to which I would not go to see my love again — to rescue her from the calamities that threatened her. And, as I hastily reviewed the matter, the conviction grew upon me that apart altogether from my confidence in his good-will and discretion Dr. Niven was the one person to whom I could look for aid. Hazy as was my recollection of the previous evening, I felt each instant more certain that his parting words — his hint at some disclosure which was to be the main purpose of his forthcoming visit — concerned not so much myself as the figure that had vanished under his eyes into the starlit darkness. Well — I halted abruptly and stared at the clouds gathering above the ridge — the time for beating about the bush was past; I would meet him more than halfway. I would tell him everything....

With this decision came a measure of relief. I lay down on my bed; overcome by the emotion of the day, and still weak from the effects of the fever, I dropped asleep.

I was awakened by Baluka moving about preparing my tea. Dusk was falling, but the room was illumined by so wild a light that I jerked myself up on an elbow, wondering whether I were delirious again. No vestige of sunset was visible through the open door; in its stead precipices of cloud towering to the zenith shone with a fantastic coppery hue revealing on their surfaces chasms of darkness in which lightning flickered. As I watched, loud taps sounded on the roof — then a prolonged, stunning uproar; hailstones, bigger than marbles, bombarded the verandah and ricochetted across the threshold. For a moment or two after the downpour ceased the Reserve and its scattered lamp-lit windows gleamed under the ocherous sky like an exotically tinted Christmas card.

Baluka stalked to the door. Normally he preserved towards atmospheric conditions the indifference he displayed in relation to all external matters, but now he gazed upward with attention, sniffing the air softly.

'Storm coming?' I suggested as he re-entered the room.

'Big storm.' He nodded impassively.

I sat down at the table a prey to a new anxiety. Thunder-storms in King George's Town were apt to be not merely alarming but dangerous. For some mysterious reason, due perhaps to the admixture of iron in the local stone, the place was notorious for the relative frequency of fires and casualties resulting from these outbursts.

Supposing — I lowered the teacup from my lips, its contents untasted — Dr. Niven were detained; or merely decided, as, under the circumstances, he might very reasonably do, to postpone his visit? With an effort I diverted my mind from this contingency sufficiently to begin my meal. But the mouthfuls lodged in my throat; pushing the plate away, I rose and stepped to the door.

The chill of the hail had passed, leaving the air heavy and tingling with electricity. Second by second, in blinding alternations, the night shone out and vanished. An oppressive quiet hung over the town. On the road beyond the Departmental Store intermittent blasts from a whistle approached and died away; a bicyclist messenger was warning members of the volunteer fire-brigade to hold themselves in readiness.

I turned back and stumbled into the chair. I was positive now that he would not come.

A crushing sense of blankness, of frustration, took hold of me. I dropped my head on my hands.

The storm was gathering swiftly; through my fingers I saw, reflected in my mirror, the flashes changing to tree-like verticals of flame; claps of thunder sounded on an odd flattened note.

I felt suddenly thankful at the prospect; amid the tumult I might forget. Meanwhile — I threw myself back in the chair; there was no use sitting thinking. The letter rustled in my pocket; mechanically I drew it out; I would lock it away in my despatch box....

As I turned to the foot of the bed my eye caught a faint glow wavering, brightening, on stair-landing outside. I halted: a lantern rose out of the darkness. Accompanied by a deafening bang from without Dr. Niven stepped into the doorway.

He hung up his hat on a peg and wiped his brow. 'Weel, were ye thinking I was lost?'

I felt myself sway and caught hold of the chair. 'Not exactly — I was afraid — It's awfully good of you ——'

He looked round sharply. 'What's wrong, laddie?' His eyes rested on the letter in my hand. 'Have ye had bad news?'

After an instant's hesitation I held it out; this was as good a way of beginning as any other.

He lifted his lantern on to the table.

Smoothing the paper, he leaned towards the light, his bushy eyebrows drawn together. ‘I see, I see,’ he murmured after a prolonged peal had died away. He glanced up. ‘This’ll have been a shock, I’m thinking?’

I nodded.

‘Aye.’ He finished his perusal. ‘Pneumonia. It doesna take long when it gets a hold. Puir leddy. I mind her fine. The last time I saw her was here, in King George’s Town — thirty years ago, and more. She came with the Governor on one of his tours. It seems like yesterday.... She was a bonny lassie then; we all thought the world of her. Aye, aye.’ Slowly he folded the sheet; then, with another glance at me, he opened it again. ‘Weel, it’s an ill wind — laddie; I see she’s left ye a couple of hundred a year.’

I nodded again. Save that it had effectually laid Grey’s specter in the doorway I had scarcely thought of it.

The doctor fingered his beard; his face assumed a look that I vaguely recognized from the previous night. ‘If that doesna beat all!’ he murmured. ‘The ways of Providence....’

‘You don’t understand,’ I said quickly. ‘Of course it will make all the difference in a way, but — I just can’t think of it now. She was — oh, it’s no use trying to explain....’ My voice shook. ‘And, besides, there’s something else.... I want to tell you ——’

I stopped. A blight of flame enveloped the building; for an appreciable instant, through the end window, I saw it stream across the sky, rolling up like a gigantic banner above the ridge: an incandescent core ran down among the treetops.

As I dashed across the floor a series of rending detonations culminated in a crash that set the room rattling around us like a street car in motion.

I threw up the sash.

'Whereabouts d'ye think ——' The doctor peered out beside me; our eyes met in a startled question.

My heart missed a beat: on the slope above, faintly rose-colored like a new-lit Bengal light, a glow was outlining the trees.

His hand gripped my shoulders. 'Fane's! I was feared of it!'

Pushing me back, he ran to the table and seized the lantern.

'Wait!' I caught up my shoes and began wrenching them on.

'Nothing of the kind!' He turned peremptorily. 'Bide where ye are! Ye're no' able for the like of this.' He vanished through the door.

With a rush that jammed us both against the stair-railing I overtook him. For an instant he held me in a powerful grasp. Then, raising the lantern, he stared into my eyes. 'Have yer way, then! I'm thinking the Almighty has ta'en the words out of my mouth this night! Come and see for yerself. But mind!' — his fingers tightened — 'I'll have my say before we're through!' He released his hold. Together we plunged down the steps.

CHAPTER XVIII

I REACHED the lower verandah before him.

'This way!' I dashed towards the wall.

'Where are ye off to? I've left the gig ——'

Leaping round, I seized his arm. 'Come on!' I pointed vehemently through the darkness at the slope. 'This leads straight up — we'll be there in no time!'

For an instant he hung back, then, shaking off my grip, darted with me along the path. By the aid of a vivid flash from the sky I threw myself across the wall, pausing in a frenzy of impatience to hold the lantern while my companion lumbered actively over the coping and dropped beside me. 'Ye ken yer way oot o' this?' he panted sharply as we raced up the glade. 'Ye'll mind that it's pit-mirk.'

I rushed ahead. Know my way! If 'mirk' meant darkness I wondered whether human feet could ever have been better equipped to answer his question for themselves than were mine at that moment. How many times, blindfolded by night and love, had I left them to pick their way unheeded amid these tufts and stones? At the withered orange tree I checked my stride; the beams from the lantern glimmered and swayed upon the tangle of bushes beyond. 'Keep your light off,' I muttered over my shoulder. 'We're better without it.' Pushing aside the twigs that covered the entrance, I caught his hand and pulled him on to the path.

The weakness of the past days had fallen from me like a cloak; as I sped upward I could hear my companion scrambling and puffing half a dozen paces behind. Then, suddenly, I stumbled; we had reached the steeper slope. An excruciating pain stabbed my side, my heart pounded as if it would rupture its tissues. I forced myself on, but at each step my feet slid backward on the greasy earth.

'Mind yerself, laddie!' The doctor's voice reached me faintly; then came a startled exclamation. 'Wha's this?' and the swish of a branch. Next instant something momentarily unrecognizable, like a rounded bar of steel, encircled my waist and bore me up and forward. I turned my head; my chin encountered a surface of rough serge and a metal button: Baluka. He must have seen our lantern....

The relief was immediate. The path had widened (up this very stretch — the memory seemed to rush out from a remote past — I had supported my love....) I felt Baluka quicken his pace.

'Wait! Doctor ——' I tried to push back.

'I'm a' right. Never — mind me!' The words died in a choke.

Baluka halted abruptly; for a moment he released his hold. Then, as I stood, a hand pressed to my ribs, recovering my breath, I was seized anew — this time from the other side. With a scuffle of feet Dr. Niven was thrust against my elbow. Looming between our heads, his own eerily invisible in the obscurity, Baluka swept us upward.

'I say!' Fending the twigs from my face, I twisted round. 'He can't — he'll burst a blood-vessel!'

'Hoots!' The doctor wheezed composedly between gasps. 'I mind when he could run up-hill and down-dale from one end of Zululand to the other. This'll no hairm him.'

Amid deafening reverberations from the ridge above, we neared what I guessed to be the last bend. My neighbor was lurching; at every other step his foot collided with mine. 'The Lord send we'll be up in time,' he whispered. 'Mebbe yon we saw — was just an outhouse....'

We wheeled round the corner; I pointed up. The sky ahead was crimson, smoke rolled over the trees alive with dancing sparks. Above the laboring of my lungs I heard a dull, crackling roar.

'Let go!' Wrenching myself free — I must have got a second wind — I fled, clambering and slipping, up the final ascent.

My first sensation on reaching the top was one of relief. The front of the building was intact. Up to a point the doctor's surmise seemed to have been correct; the conflagration was at the rear and appeared only now to be gaining control of the dwelling-house. As I staggered through the opening in the garden wall a chimney-stack on what were presumably the kitchen premises behind fell with a crash; a spout of flame shot up, darting along the roof of the main building; the window above the porch flashed out in a red gleam.

While I dashed across the flower-beds a cry sounded from within — repeated again and again ere I reached the porch. With a paroxysm of relief (during a ghastly second I had thought it locked) I flung open the door.

For a moment I halted on the threshold. Volumes of smoke pouring across the hall whirled outward on the draught, enveloping me in a cloud, through which glared a tunnel of fire from a doorway opposite. As I stumbled forward with outstretched hands, blazing tongues licked up the back wall, illuminating the staircase; the steps — a single flight leading direct to the upper landing — were uninjured, but the banisters had started to smoulder. Through the din I heard an incessant banging.

'Inez!' I shouted. 'Inez! Where are you?'

As though in answer, a series of agonized cries rose from above. 'Father! Father! Open the door!'

I jumped to the stairs. Save where the flames from below were flickering between the rails the landing was smothered in darkness. As I raced upward I had a glimpse of a white figure struggling frantically with the handle, and beating upon the panels of a door.

'Inez!' I caught her in my arms.

'No! No!' She thrust me back. 'My father! He is in there! I can't ——'

A couple of violent wrenches assured me that the door was either bolted or jammed by the heat. I threw my weight against the lock, but the woodwork resisted solidly. 'Can't he hear?' I paused breathless. 'If he could lend a hand ——'

'No! Oh, we must get something — an axe —— The kitchen ——' She turned to the steps.

I seized her arm. 'The whole place is alight! Wait——' I gathered myself together for a renewed assault.

A shout rose from below. 'Hi! Where are ye?'

Across the now luridly glowing well of the hall I saw Dr. Niven on the threshold.

'Baluka!' I yelled. 'Come!'

The doctor swung round, revealing the huge form of his companion looming behind, motionless, his eyes gleaming upward.

An unaccountable pause followed. Dr. Niven craned up on tip-toe, speaking in the other's ear. Baluka responded by a violent negative gesture. Again I called, but my voice failed in a spasm of coughing; dizzy and half-asphyxiated, I swayed forward on the top step.

Abruptly, shaking himself erect, the Zulu sprang to the stairs. Leaping round, I tried vainly to drag my love from the door.

Of the next moments I retain only a confused, nightmare memory. The landing had become all but untenable; flames writhed across the floor. In the far corner by the wall the boards had collapsed, forming a roaring flue vomiting blazing fragments. The heat was insupportable; but for the fact that the glass of the skylight in the roof had crashed in we could not have breathed.

A vision of Baluka materializing with a bound upon the step behind us remains vivid enough. Towering amid the smoke, his face convulsed with unguessable emotions (even at that moment it never occurred to me to associate him with any species of fear), he presented an aspect so startlingly appropriate to our surroundings as to stick indelibly in my mind.

Again I struggled to draw Inez toward the stairs; clinging to the handle, she pointed within, gasping a string of incomprehensible words.

Baluka laid his shoulder to the door; instantly the woodwork split from top to bottom. Inserting his fingers in the crack, he wrenched the structure to pieces as one might tear the straw from a packing-case.

Squeezing past him, eluding my grasp, Inez darted through the cavity.

'Catch her!' I shouted, springing forward.

Baluka snatched at her gown, missed, and, with a stagger recoiled from the doorway.

'Go on!' For an instant I pushed, then, finding him immovable, slipped under his arm.

The atmosphere of the room beyond was less dense, but the left wall had begun to bulge and crack; smoke, pouring from the crevices, floated in wreaths, obscuring the glimmer of a night light on a mantelpiece at the far end.

I had time for but a single glance; tripping over an obstruction on the floor, I fell full length. Beneath me, her nightgown shining faintly in the dusk, lay my love.

Climbing to my knees, I pulled her to me. Dazed with the efforts of the last half-hour, suffocated and blinded, I sank sideways. Red streaks on the inner wall invaded the gloom, striking on Baluka's sweat-covered face as he crouched, his immense shoulders protruding through the wrecked doorway. I beckoned despairingly.

Once more I was conscious of an inexplicable pause; as in a dream a hideous paralysis seemed to emanate from the very air around.

The draught along the floor partially revived me. Inez stirred in my arms. 'The bed ——' She cast herself forward, clutching at the flounces of an old-fashioned four-poster which, in the increasing glare, was visible over my shoulder.

A series of crashes, drowned in a prolonged rumble, sounded from the threshold. Baluka, silhouetted against a curtain of fire darkened by toppling beams, burst into the room; the rear wall of the hall had fallen in: our retreat was cut off.

Grasping a chair, his other arm shielding his face, he bounded to a window behind us and smashed the panes to fragments. As he drew back I lurched to my feet and, clasping Inez round the waist, staggered to the opening.

'Stop!' With a wrench that nearly brought us both to the floor she threw herself backward.

'Baluka will bring him,' I gasped, wrestling desperately to retain my hold. 'For God's sake ——'

'No!' Her voice broke in a scream. 'Not Baluka — no one — only I ——'

Loud cracks rose from the boards beneath our feet; in the corner by the doorway the plaster and brickwork dissolved in a whirling column of flame.

I swung her round towards the window; at the same moment a heavy object waving across the outside darkness scraped and bumped against the broken sash; with a final heave the top of the ladder came to rest across the sill.

'It's all right!' I shouted in her ear; thrusting her into Baluka's arms, I dashed towards the bed.

A sheet of fire ran up the opposite wall; the flooring at the far side of the room was alight from end to end. I felt my shoulder gripped as by a row of iron hooks; snatched off my feet, I reeled back upon the window-ledge while Baluka sprang past me.

Inez had dropped against the wainscoting. Summoning the last remnants of my strength, I hoisted her on to the ledge; as I seized hold of the top of the ladder a head rose out of the darkness below, followed by a body clambering over the sill.

'Here! Give her me, laddie!' Dr. Niven heaved himself on to the floor.

At that point my mind becomes a blank. I must have retained sufficient control of my faculties to help in the business of lowering our burden to safety, but I only remember falling in a heap on to the ground.

Some one dragged me to the steps of the stoep; as I choked and coughed the smoke out of my lungs a face which I gradually recognized as Mr. Carleton's leaned over me. On catching my eye he nodded reassuringly and turned to a white figure huddled against the wall of the porch. I scrambled up and staggered after him.

'She's all right.' Slipping off his overcoat, he bent down and wrapped it about her. 'She's coming to.' He placed his hands under her arms. 'Can you help?'

Together we carried her across the path to a shallow bank that bordered the upper section of the garden. As we laid her down she opened her eyes. 'Where ——' She struggled to her elbow.

'Your father is coming — he's quite safe.' Mr. Carleton put a hand on her shoulder. 'Dr. Niven is with him.'

As he spoke Baluka strode between us and the burning windows. Loaded though he was, he outstripped the doctor. 'On ye go!' panted the latter, waving him ahead. At the far end of the bank, beyond the glare and smoke from the building, they halted.

Inez swayed to her feet and darted towards them. Mr. Carleton caught my arm. 'Wait! I may want you.' He turned sharply. 'Stand back there!'

For the first time I became aware of a throng of people grouped among the flower-beds and on the open space at the end of the house. As the Commissioner moved towards them those on the outer fringe fell back.

'There's no use your standing about here,' he called out. 'We've got every one out; there's nothing more to be done. The fire-brigade is late, as usual. The whole place is ——'

'Here they are, sir!' cried a voice. 'They're just coming.'

A commotion of hoofs, whip-cracking, and shouts rose from the end of the clearing nearest the town. Flashing gaudily in the blaze from the flames, a lumbering mass of crimson and burnished metal bumped into view. A figure in overalls with a bushy white beard protruding under his brass helmet pushed his way through the crowd.

'You're too late, I'm afraid, Captain.' Mr. Carleton stepped forward. The other's reply was drowned in a mounting roar as a portion of the roof fell in; after a glance along the front they hurried round the end of the building.

It was obvious that the Commissioner was right; the entire structure was doomed. Its sun-scorched walls (unlike the great majority of dwellings in King George's Town the place was built of brick and timber) had offered little resistance to the conflagration. Moreover — one of the firemen shouted the information to somebody — the well containing the only adjacent water-supply was situated in the kitchen yard, where the fire had started, and was now buried under the ruins of the outhouses.

As the heat from the glowing shell increased the onlookers retreated and began scattering about the flower-beds, casting curious glances towards the little group at the far end of the bank.

Remembering Mr. Carleton's orders, I was running forward to intercept them when a fellow in shirt-sleeves and riding-breeches pushed in front of me.

'Clear out!' The newcomer faced round with a menacing wave of his arms. As he hustled the intruders back I recognized Rashleigh. He turned on me with a challenging stare. 'Now then, you're not wanted here ——'

'One moment ——' I heard Mr. Carleton's voice behind me. 'This gentleman is — er — a friend of the family's. I'm obliged to you, though, for keeping the others back. Ah, here is the Inspector.' He turned to a portly figure in the blue uniform of the Town Police who had hastened up, wiping his brow. 'Inspector, see that every one is kept out of the garden. In fact I prefer that you should clear them off altogether. There's nothing to be gained by their remaining now.'

'Very good, sir.' The officer saluted and, blowing his whistle, commenced operations by shoving Rashleigh off the path.

'Keep your dirty paws off,' blurted out the latter. Springing forward, he faced the Commissioner and jerked himself to attention.

'Excuse me — I ——' he stammered.

'He was Colonel Fane's orderly,' I whispered. 'Perhaps ——'

'All right, he can wait over here. Every one else must go, Inspector.' With a sign to me to follow, Mr. Carleton turned along the path.

Skirting the top of the bank, stumbling over plants and stone-borders, we reached the end of the garden. A smoky dusk enveloped us. Vaguely I distinguished Inez kneeling; beside her lay a dark form, its head and shoulders invisible in the black shadow of the slope. I gazed around in search of Dr. Niven; as my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I saw him over by the wall; at his side stood Baluka.

The doctor's voice reached me faintly, rising and falling in an urgent undertone. Motionless, save for red gleams as his eyeballs caught the glow from the building, the Zulu maintained a profound silence.

Inez leaned over the figure on the ground; straightening herself, she glanced round. 'Doctor ——'

I slipped across the garden and touched Dr. Niven on the shoulder.

He shook off my hand. 'I'll be there in a minute.'

As I stood irresolute Mr. Carleton stepped beside me; taking my arm, he turned aside a dozen paces. 'There is something that perhaps' — he gave me a somber look — 'you don't understand.'

'But surely,' I drew back impatiently, 'he should be attending to ——' I paused; a fleeting impression received a moment before recurred to my mind. 'Is there anything wrong with Baluka?'

My companion's fingers twitched. Releasing me, he folded his arms across his chest, his beard spreading over them as he dropped his chin. 'God forbid. He's a brave fellow.... Niven seems to think he's all right — he ought to know,' he added indistinctly.

At that moment the doctor passed us. Kneeling down opposite Inez, he bent forward, his movements invisible to me in the shadow of the bank.

Presently he rose and hastened towards us. 'I must have my bag,' he whispered. 'I left it in the gig.'

'I'll get it.' I turned in the direction of the wall.

He caught my jacket. 'I'm no wanting that! Whoever goes must hurry. You've had ower much for one night already — and it's no finished. Baluka'll have to ——'

'He's had all he can stand for the moment, too, I expect. What about our friend the orderly?' Mr. Carleton faced round and gazed across the length of the garden. Conspicuous in his white shirt, Rashleigh stood leaning against a tree.

'I'll ask him.' The Commissioner moved off. 'Where did you say?'

'I left the gig in the P.W.D. store yard. Tell him to drive up by the town road.' The doctor pointed to the end of the clearing. 'He mustna be long.'

The glare from the building had begun to fade; at intervals a crash, followed by a vivid shower of sparks, rose from within the walls, as a charred beam or section of brickwork detached itself and fell. With the ebbing of the flames the smoke had cleared away. In the smouldering glow the garden, patterned with its flower-beds and paths, stretched into the night like the hearth of some vast, unlighted room. The storm had long since passed, but the sky was without stars, the air heavy, stifling, as though summer had crept back uneasily from its grave.

Mr. Carleton's returning footsteps sounded behind me. With a nod he made his way to a small rockery that marked the center of the garden; sinking down, he motioned to me to find a place beside him.

As the minutes passed my head dropped on my hands; I felt faint with exhaustion. A rattle of wheels roused me. Inez looked quickly over her shoulder. I lurched to my feet, but Dr. Niven was before me. Making a peremptory sign to me to resume my seat, he hurried along the path.

A few moments later he reappeared, carrying, in addition to his bag, one of the lamps from the gig (he must have mislaid or broken his lantern). Handing it to Inez, he struck a match, but the wick refused to burn. With an angry grunt he squatted down and fumbled in his bag. Inez lit another match; in its tiny beam I saw the glint of a hypodermic syringe; rising to his knees behind her, he leaned again into the darkness.

Fatigue crushed me like a physical weight; I slipped to the ground and propped my back against the rockery. Desperately I tried to keep my eyelids up, but time after time, as my head sank forward, they dropped with a jerk. In the midst of the effort, slumber rolled down like a dark wave.

A sensation of intense chill penetrated my consciousness. Shivering, I started up. Blackness lay around. Through the shattered windows opposite dying convolutions of red and brown glimmered like cinders in a grate. A stench of burnt-out debris and scorched metal drifted across the garden, mingling with damp whiffs from beneath the invisible trees. Cracks, startling as pistol shots, sounded from the building, as remnants of the corrugated-iron roof contracted in the cold.

I staggered to my feet. Mr. Carleton was sprawling beside me, asleep, a rug from the gig round his shoulders. A deep obscurity had fallen upon the slope. As I crept forward on tiptoe a low hiss brought me to a halt. Faintly I distinguished Dr. Niven's hand raised; Inez lay huddled against the bank.

Retreating noiselessly, I crossed the open space, and, skirting the wall, came upon Baluka sitting on the ground, his head between his knees. He moved as if to rise, but, pressing my hand on his shoulder, I forced him back.

As I retraced my steps a stir rose amid the branches around. The air freshened; a sigh from the vast spaces beyond spread down the ridge and died away. The darkness seemed to draw closer; a deeper hush stilled the fluttering overhead. Spectral as the background of a dream the treetops showed. Dawn had come.

Mr. Carleton moved and looked up. A sound came from the bank. Placing a finger on my lips, I stepped forward. Inez had risen to her knees beside the recumbent figure. Dr. Niven, hunched up on his elbow, clasped a wrist extended on the ground. As I watched he, too, climbed on one knee. Inez, her back to me, leaned forward; the doctor, his fingers pressing the wrist beside him, stared at her doubtfully.

Bending nearer, I gazed over her shoulder. A ground mist lay above the bank; for a long moment I peered through the gray, floating wreaths, then, with a swift intake of breath, I drew back.... In that instant I understood all.

CHAPTER XIX

Among the processes of the human brain there are none more mysterious than its secrecies. It stores up impressions, takes note of facts, draws deductions — and then, when confronted with some overwhelming revelation, it throws open its pigeonholes like an industrious but totally inefficient employee who would cry, 'Of course I've known all along, it is all here, but...'

As I stood looking into the throbbing blackness of my lids I seemed to hear within my head the whispers, explanations, excuses.

I felt myself sway and reopened my eyes; a terrible attraction drew their glance back to the bank, now plain in the chill, early light. But I averted them quickly. I had seen enough. Not for nothing had the wired-in 'location' behind the road by the tennis-courts, with its sights of living death, exercised a grim fascination on me since the day of my arrival in King George's Town: only too well did I know the signs.... In that first glimpse a moment before, I had recognized, propped against the slope in front of me, the characteristic 'lion face' — appalling, distorted beyond human semblance — of a leper.

It is difficult to convey to a reader ignorant of up-country life in South Africa thirty years ago, the comprehensiveness of that enlightenment — the unique quality of its horror. I can but state that instantly, and in a relentless illumination of detail, it lit up every circumstance of dread with which the girlish figure kneeling at my side had invested the mystery surrounding herself and the house whose walls stood blackened and empty in the growing brightness.

Throughout the ages and in every land the most dreadful of human ills has held a place apart in the minds of men. In all tongues its victims bear a name that provides a synonym alike for ultimate defilement and for exile beyond the clemency, if not the pity, of mankind.

But words vary in their potency. To the untraveled Englishman of to-day a leper is little more than an idea — as far removed from experience as a magician's curse or the terrors of the Inquisition. While there, in that trampled, ruined garden, the reality was in our midst, the stigmata of its corruption hideous at our feet, its menace and doom immemorial shadows striking across the African sunshine.

I straightened myself as from a blow. An uncontrollable impulse to snatch my love, even then, at the eleventh hour, from the contamination at her side took hold of me: my arm jerked forward.

Dr. Niven looked up, his fingers still encircling the thickened, purple wrist lying motionless on the ground; his eyes met mine. There are moments when the prestige of professional status is supreme; before that glance, strained with fatigue, vigilant, composed, my arms dropped by my sides.

The minutes passed. It seemed to me as I stood without movement, my brain reeling before the crowding implications of that discovery, that out of the glade below, every whisper, every look which had passed amid those moonlit and starlit hours of bliss, rose again before me transformed into shapes of dire significance.

Always fear had been there. That I had known. Fear of the present, of the future, of the very night around; fear (with a contraction of my heart I remembered) for me....

But for herself? I bowed my head, I could have groaned aloud. Of the dread specter that awaited, night by night, on the path behind the withered orange tree, that stepped by her side into the foul stillness of the yellow-washed house, not a hint had slipped from her lips.

A sudden rage seized me. By what infamy had she been condemned to such a fate? I leaned forward and looked again.... The scorched blankets had been thrown back, revealing the tall supine figure. I steeled my gaze (in horror and pity, as the seconds passed, I remembered the legend — one of so many that clung around Rowley Fane — of his good looks....). Quickly I turned away; anger was impotent against that victim of so implacable a destiny.

At least he had been preserved from its crowning vengeance. With a shudder my thoughts flashed to a memory of the *Norham Castle*. On the last evening on board, as I leaned by the bulwark watching the melancholy glory of the sunset, one of the ship's officers had stopped and, touching my arm, pointed across the darkening water to a rocky outline, low-lying, black against the western sky. That, he said, was Robben Island. Vaguely I had heard of it, it was one of the 'sights' to be looked for at the end of the voyage. Behind its desolate shores, alternately drenched by Atlantic fog, and burning in the glare of the sub-tropical sun, was immured a community — the most tragic, perhaps, to be found under the skies — exclusively composed of lunatics, convicts, and lepers.

Thither were bound the crumbling forms of both sexes and every age that moved languidly amid the walled-in shadows behind the tennis courts. An abomination in the sight of their fellows, proscribed by the laws of the Colony, they and their like had been ferreted out from across the length and breadth of the veld, to await, in a score of 'locations' similar to that in the Reserve, the final stage of an Odyssey from which there was no return.

And indeed their progress had about it an obscure impressiveness not unworthy of those who are the afflicted of the gods. Once, on a sultry evening, while driving back alone across the veld with my empty pay-bags, I heard the tolling of a bell, rising and falling through the dusk like the clang of a buoy at sea. Puzzled, I drew up and listened. Dying away, then chiming loud on the breeze, the sound came slowly nearer. Just as my horse — grown suddenly restive — jerked his head and started forward, a dark mass topped the rise in front, and banging out in a deafening clatter, jolted towards me. Peering through the gloom, I distinguished a trek-wagon behind its span of oxen and, suspended in a triangle above the rounded outline of the tilt, a bell swinging against the sky; on either side rode a couple of figures on horseback with rifles slung behind them. A voice challenged me in Dutch. Hastily I backed. As the huge structure lurched and clanged through the darkness a faint, sickening odor crept out on the dusty air....

Now, in the oppression of the morning (thunder was already darkening the clouds above the ridge) I shivered; a sudden dizziness overtook me, the trail of the 'leper wagon' stirred again in my nostrils.... Out of the past I heard my love's whisper, 'Every thought about me — even yours — means terrible danger.' Yes. For the figure lying by her knee — danger imminent, from every side, in a land where, before one law, at least, all men were equal; where the 'location,' the tolling wagon, and Robben Island awaited every detected leper throughout the Colony — black and white alike.

Instinctively, at that thought, I swung round. Mr. Carleton had moved up behind me some moments before. Bareheaded, his eyes fixed on the ground, he stood lost in reverie. As I gazed at the lines showing on his imposing, bearded face, a sudden memory came to me of having been told that, in bygone days, he (who was now the representative of Government and administrator of the Law in King George's Town) and Rowley Fane had been inseparable companions. More than once during the past night I had wondered at his continued presence; now I began to understand — that, and much besides....

While I looked he glanced up; Dr. Niven had moved, their eyes met. The latter nodded almost imperceptibly.

A sound, startling, unrecognizable, rose from the bank; during a long-drawn-out moment it hovered on the air, then died away in a hoarse, rustling sigh. The feet stretched on the earth in front of me twitched, and turned inward.

Motionless, Dr. Niven strained forward, seeming to harken as to some infinitely distant echo. Then his shoulders relaxed; gently he released the wrist he had held through so many hours and straightened himself. Inez swayed, her hands fluttered out; with a low cry, clasping them against her breast, she bent her head.

Mr. Carleton touched my arm; together we moved away. In silence we paced across the garden; as we neared the far end Rashleigh rose from beneath a tree at the edge of the clearing and came towards us. Raising his hand to his cap, he halted before my companion.

'The Colonel, sir — d'you mind telling me — is he in danger?'

Mr. Carleton paused. 'You have known him for some time, I believe?'

'I served under him for five years. He knew my people. And' — the other stammered — 'I've known about ——' His voice broke off.

Mr. Carleton's eyes remained fixed on his, he nodded gravely. 'In that case I think you will be glad to know that his — his dangers are over. Colonel Fane is dead.'

Rashleigh, his twisted face showing haggard in the early light, stared past us into the distance. Abruptly he wheeled about. 'Thank you — good of you to tell me. I'll stay for a bit, if I may. If I can be of any use ——'

Again the Commissioner nodded. The other, with a vague salute, moved back to his post by the tree.

'Carleton!' Dr. Niven's voice reached us across the flower-beds. We glanced round; he was helping Inez to her feet.

As we hurried to where they stood he beckoned to my companion. 'Will ye take her to the gig?' He laid a hand on my sleeve. 'I'll be wanting you a minute.'

Stepping forward, Mr. Carleton placed his arm within Inez's. She shivered and drew back; swiftly, from over her shoulder, her glance met mine. For an instant it lingered on my face, expressionless — heartrending. Ere I could stir she turned and, bowing her head, allowed herself to be guided towards the path.

I was recalled to a consciousness of my surroundings by Dr. Niven's voice shouting an order in Zulu. I started and looked round. Baluka had left his place near the wall and was marching to the outhouse by the opening; a moment later he vanished within. Stiffly my companion hoisted himself upright. The blankets had been pulled closely over the figure on the ground, hiding all save its rigid outline. As we waited the doctor pointed silently to the sky; heavy clouds were drifting over the ridge, a drop fell on my upturned face.

Baluka reappeared and signaled. Balancing himself on the slope of the bank, Dr. Niven bent down and placed his hands beneath the recumbent shoulders; at a nod I grasped the covering under the feet. Slowly we carried our burden across the open space. As we reached the door of the shed Baluka stepped back and, drawing himself to his full height, raised his arm in the salute I had seen once before.

In the dusty twilight of the interior a space had been cleared amid a confusion of tools, broken flower-pots, and lumber. There we deposited our load. While we lingered for a moment a shadow darkened the doorway; Rashleigh, snatching off his cap, came to attention on the threshold.

He moved aside to let us pass; then, stepping back in front of the entrance, folded his arms. 'I'll stand guard,' he said briefly.

Dr. Niven paused. 'Rashleigh, isn't it?'

The other nodded.

'Aye. Of course. You were one of Fane's lot.... Weel, since ye're here, sir, I'll be obliged. It'll no be for long. I'll send before the morning is past.'

He turned to me. 'Now, laddie, be off with ye this minute!' He surveyed me dubiously. 'I'll be having you on my hands again, I'm thinking.' Scratching his beard, he pulled out his watch. 'I would drive ye back, but there isna time; I must get Miss Inez through the town (I'm taking her with me to my place) before the folk are about. Anyway, it's quicker for ye the way we came.' He pointed to the path disappearing through the bushes below.

I put out a hand to the wall and steadied myself. 'But — when ——'

'None of yer "buts" and "whens" — just leave things to me. I'll promise ye ——.' He stopped and glanced over my shoulder, 'What is it, Carleton?'

As I turned Mr. Carleton hurried past us.

'She wants me to thank the native messenger.' He pointed to where Baluka leaned in statuesque abstraction by the wall.

Dr. Niven followed him with his eyes. The Commissioner paused in front of the other, who had pulled himself erect. A few words passed. Mr. Carleton held out his hand. Baluka gazed for an instant in well-bred hesitation, then took it impassively.

My companion grunted approvingly. 'He's no one to show much, but that'll please him fine! Him and Rowley Fane were friends together in old times when your Baluka was a great man in his own country. And when it came to fighting each other — as they had to later — it would be all in the day's work to them. They had real warriors' hearts, thae two.'

His words reached me as from a great distance. Something had slipped in my brain: a stupor of unutterable weariness and isolation fell on me. With eyes that seemed to jar in their sockets I stared over his shoulder past the blackened walls, past the trees, to the clearing beyond: to a figure, bowed under a stormy sky, youthful, crowned with gold — alone....

I felt his hand on my arm steering me through the opening. '... off to yer bed and stay there till I come.... Mind what I tell't ye: there's good news, though mebbe ye canna think it the now....'

Instinct alone must have guided me as I lurched and stumbled on that endless descent. My mind was in abeyance, divested of all bodily consciousness; unreality enfolded and bore me up as in the fantastic locomotion of a dream. Like a man in a trance I must have moved with my gaze on high, for I remember only the sky; and the reflexes of the past hours, as if sensing the hebetude of my brain, launched themselves on my retina, peopling the thundery opalescence of the clouds with Apocalyptic visions of fire, pestilence, and death, that streamed up the zenith under banners of flame.

Neither wonder nor distress came near to me; I was immune from the creatures of thought. The phantasmagoria of the heavens unrolled above my head with no more significance than attached itself to the unending path falling beneath my feet. Dimly I was aware of a gray brightness around; a moment of exultation, without a past or a future, floated with me suspended like a point of light in the emptiness of my mind. While I staggered and slid my lips kept repeating '... I've found... I've found....'

At last, at the journey's end, the formula completed itself: as I dragged myself up the steps a whisper rushed to my ears '... the one — the only one in all the world — that isn't wanted, either.'

CHAPTER XX

'Wake yersel', laddie!' I felt my shoulder being shaken; a familiar aroma of stale tobacco accentuated by damp invaded my senses. I opened my eyes; Dr. Niven was standing by the bed.

He turned to the table. 'I've made ye yer tea. Have ye a spare cup?'

I nodded towards a wooden box in the corner. As my companion took off his glistening waterproof (rain was falling beyond the verandah in a steady downpour) I thrust back the blankets and dropped my feet to the floor.

'Here!' The doctor tossed my overcoat at me. 'Wrap up and put on yer slippers. Here's yer tea.'

Shivering, dazed with sleep, I obeyed; sinking on to a seat by the table, I leaned my head on my hands.

Dr. Niven lowered himself into the canvas chair opposite; he nodded sharply at the cup beside me. 'Dinna let it get cold, man! I had a look at ye before ye wakened. Ye're no much the worse — for the present, anyway. But do as I tell ye — drink it up and eat something!' Drawing towards him the tin mug he had taken from the chest, he emptied it in a series of gulps, and pulled out his pipe.

For some moments he smoked in silence.

Then, as I pushed away my plate, he looked up. 'Are ye finished?'

I nodded.

He dragged forward his chair. 'Now, Mr. Jack, you and me must have a talk, but we'll waste no words; I havena closed my eyes for thirty hours, and I'm no as young as I was.'

I glanced across at him; suddenly remembering that it was on my account he was here, I noticed with remorse that he looked worn-out — old.

'I'm sorry ——' I began.

'Na, na,' he raised his hand. 'Dinna fash about that. I'll be a' right when I've had a bit sleep. Ye can help me best by hearing me out quietly. But first I'll trouble ye to answer a question. Ye'll do me the credit to believe that I'm no asking from idle curiosity.' He leaned his elbows on the table. 'What is there between you and Miss Inez?'

I sat back; the hand extended beside my plate clenched itself. 'I love her dearly,' I said, after a pause.

He stared at me without moving. 'Aye, but what are ye wanting with her? Is it marriage?'

'Yes.' My lips formed the word as though on their own volition. Quickly I looked away; a second passed. 'I could try' — my voice sank — 'to make her happy — for a little.'

The canvas chair creaked loudly, a match scraped; I glanced round. My companion had thrown himself back in his seat. When he turned in my direction I became aware, through a cloud of smoke, of a surprising change in his aspect; an air of relief, amounting to incipient jocosity, transformed the wrinkles about his eyes and mouth. On meeting my gaze his face resumed its gravity; he treated me to a little old-fashioned bow. 'Ye've answered as I expected, laddie — like a man and a gentleman.' He laid his pipe carefully on the table and folded his hands. 'That clears the ground anyway.'

For some moments he stared at his fingers. 'Mr. Jack, this is no a time to beat about the bush. And what I have to say concerns not only you and yon lassie I've known since she was born into a world that has used her sorely, but myself; for the happiness of the pair of ye seems like to stand or fall on yer willingness to accept my word for the safety of it.'

He paused; the commotion of the rain on the roof and treetops around filled the room with a soft, continuous roar. 'There's none' he cleared his throat harshly — 'knows better than me how I am regarded here in this town — this wee African dorp.... Humanly speaking' — the knuckles of his sunburnt fists whitened — 'I've myself to thank for that. Weel — we'll say no more of it.... But,' his voice altered, 'I would have ye understand one thing — a doctor, good, bad or indifferent, is no just like other men. He leads, in a manner of speaking, a double life: his own — which concerns only himself — and that of his professional integrity which is a part of the eternal verities. Aye, and by the same token, he's in danger of a double damnation.... Being English ye'll no be acquainted wi' the *Shorter Catechism*?'

Vaguely I shook my head.

'It's a pity.... weel, here's the answer to its opening question: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." I set little enough store on the enjoyment (yon's ower metaphysical for my taste, forbye anything else) but, with all reverence, I can say that every minute of my professional existence has been lived to His glory in the search for truth and its application to the needs and sorrows of men. And I'm no without my reward. Bitter quarrels I've had, and will have, but in the manuals of tropical medicine — which is what concerns us now — there's no name stands higher than James Niven's.'

Abruptly he got to his feet and paced the room. 'Ye'll think I'm doing the very thing I said wasna to be done — wasting talk. And blowing my own trumpet besides. But,' he halted and stared at me over his shoulder, 'there it is! In the face of the mediæval havers that passes current here in the Colony, and all the world over, for that matter, on the subject we're to speak of, can you and Miss Inez —

and mebbe one or two others whose help ye'll need — take my word for the facts?'

Silently, stupidly, I returned his gaze. He stepped to the table and lowered himself back into the chair. 'Listen, laddie! I've aye been before my time; it'll help if ye keep that in mind. It was so with the malaria — it's so to-day with the sleeping sickness. A' this talk that's been going the rounds the past year of Wallace and his *Trypanosoma gambiense* is just so much ancient history to me. They say he's a major in the Army Medical. Weel, I was hunting the trypanosoma on the Congo long afore he first buckled a sword over his hinderlets! Every medical school in Europe, from Aberdeen to Milan, knows it!'

He swung round towards the window on the end wall and jerked his head at the slope above, veiled gray in the downpour. 'And it'll be the same with what ye saw up yonder! Some Stewart or Wallace, wi' the War Office and Colonial Office and the B.M.A. behind his half-digested facts, will be snapping the words out of my mouth about the leprosy too. But no just yet — no just yet. Even I am only at the beginning of that....'

He shrugged his shoulders and sat back. 'It's an old fear ye're up against, laddie — older than Egypt. Man's reaction against the insoluble.... To this hour — and I that speak to ye am mebbe nearer the edge of it than any man living — there isna in medical science an enigma deeper than the source of leprous infection. It's no in the air, it's no in water, it's no in food — for all Sir Johnny Hutchinson's blether about his stinking fish — nor yet in flies, fleas, lice, ticks, or bugs; nor even in the mosquito. Yet it creeps from man to man, from husband to wife, from mother to child; and yer Father Damiens and, once in a while, yer Rowley Fanes rot to death from it.'

He leaned forward and put a hand on my arm. 'That's one side of the picture, laddie — the one that made the Church in old times read the Burial Service over living lepers and their children, and the State regard them as already dead — that's responsible in this year of grace for the girlie ye love creeping about hiding her bonnie head from the light of the sun. Fear of the unknown.... Well, here's the other: if I canna say what leprosy is I can tell ye what it's *not*!' His fingers tightened. 'Contagious! Incurable! Hereditary! A' buff, man! A' buff! Yer Inez is as free of taint, as free to marry, aye, and to raise a family to ye, as if her father had died in his bed of old age!'

Involuntarily I jerked my arm back. 'Then what *is* it — where is its danger — its ——'

He turned in his chair and felt for his pipe. 'Dirt. That's as near as I can explain to ye. Yonder's the secret of the infection, whatever it is — just as it was wi' typhus and the Black Death and a' the scourges of history. Yon's the danger; and, *per contra*, hygiene's the safety. Antisepsis. That's the scrap of truth I've wrested, so far, from an unbroken front of prejudice — that and the treatment wi' vegetable oils.... It mebbe doesna sound much; but,' he waved again towards the slope above, 'its application in the house up yonder has been the means, not alone of saving Inez Fane from risks that dinna bear thinking of, but of demonstrating a system which, before many years are out, will clean their stinking "locations" and Robben Islands off the face of the earth, and the leprosy after them!'

I stared at him; dazed as I was, there could be no escaping the implications of his words, the note of authority that lay behind them. I grasped the edge of the table.

'Then you say ——'

'Aye. Just that! Ye've nothing to fear, you two....'

He climbed slowly to his feet. 'So there ye are. That's what I came to say. And,' he faced me squarely, 'I'll make so bold as to add this to it! The sooner the pair of ye pack off thegither and forget the past — both yer pasts — in each other's arms the better! Dinna think I canna see the chances ye're up against in marrying at your age and hers, after a' ye've been through. But there's others that are worse. And living alone wi' the facts of life is sometimes one of them! I've done it, so I ken what I'm speaking of.'

Desperately I tried to collect my thoughts.

'But — Inez ——? How much does she understand?'

My companion paused and gazed at me. 'That's a big question to answer, laddie.' He picked up his pipe and fingered it thoughtfully. 'It wasna easy to steer a path between the two things — the truth as I knew it, and what she'd have to face in the world outside. ... I couldna guess there was to be a young Lochinvar waiting to ride off wi' her. One time or another she's heard the most of it. But when it comes to saying just what she believed — what she could take in of it — situated as she was — weel, that's another matter.' He moved toward the peg behind the door. 'But dinna fash about that the now. I'm to have it out wi' her as I've had wi' you, this very day — after I've had a lie-down. If ye're to do what I say there's no time to lose.'

'She knew at least that it was all right for her to — to be with — people ——' I stammered. 'She told me that the first night ——'

He nodded. 'Aye. I drummed that into her, though I didna foresee,' his eyes twinkled faintly, 'that she'd be turning the knowledge to such quick account — the wee hizzie! But it helped her to keep going long afore you came on the scene.' He reached up and unhooked his waterproof. 'Man! Ye just havena a notion of what that lassie's been through! At her years to be mewed up, day in, day out, night in, night out, wi' yon....' Drawing a long breath, he stared over the threshold.

'If only she had told me!' My voice shook.

He looked round. 'I wonder... ! Mebbe ye feel so now; mebbe ye would have then. But a sweetheart that was coming to ye from in and out of a lazar-house mightna be sure! And she had her father's safety on her shoulders, and him to face every time she went back — mind that!'

'Was he ——' I moistened my lips. 'Was he conscious?'

'Always. That's aye the worst of it. Even when there's no an organ or a square inch of their bodies that isna rotting — as was the case wi' him at the end — their brains are as clear as yours or mine. That's why thae "settlements," all the world over, are hells on earth. And Fane, like others of yer popular heroes, wasna an easy man to live with at the best o' times. Her mother had found that....'

I leaned my face on my hands.

'It was little enough I could do.' My companion struggled into his coat. 'He was ower far gone before he owned up to it. That's aye the trouble; there's no secretiveness like a leper's, black or white. I could but help him through. It was phthisis of the throat that killed him — on the top of the larynx lepromatous. He hadna spoken for months — just whistling and roaring.... And no sleep but what I gi'ed him. That was why ye couldna rouse him last night. Even then it wasna sure; she could never tell when he would wake up ranting.'

I nodded. Chasing themselves through my brain were memories of partings, hurried and anguished: of the jangling of a bell amid the blackness of the trees....

'And she had no one ——'

'No a soul; except ye count her black mammie that came in by the day and did the marketing. Inez couldna show herself in the town, of course.'

'But people did know—Mr. Carleton—Rashleigh ——'

'Some did. Carleton, of course — or Fane couldna have rested where he was. How many others it wouldna be easy to say. Folk hereabouts are queer....' He turned to the door. 'Now, laddie, ye mustna keep me. I'm near dropping.'

'But ——' I steadied myself against the back of the chair. 'When ——'

He halted. 'Aye, ye'll be wanting to see her. And the sooner yer affairs are settled, one way or the other, the better — that's the truth.' Taking my wrist in his fingers he scanned my face; then stepped to the threshold and glanced at the sky. 'It's no as it should be — a' this; ye've a touch of the fever again. But needs must when the de'il drives! Listen, now: get back between the clothes,' he pointed to the bed, 'till ye've had yer tea. Then dress yerself; and, when it's dark, I'll send my man up for ye in the gig. That'll give the both of us time for a rest; and I'll have my talk with Inez. She has Sister Annunziata from the Convent wi' her now to keep her company. I've seen Brand about ye and tell't him ye wouldna be about this day or to-morrow. So mind! — no showing yerself. As for the next steps, I've a plan in my head. Ye'll hear to-night.'

'Just one thing ——' I moved after him. 'If Mr. Carleton sends for me, or hears I'm ill, and comes ——'

'By the mercy of Providence he's been called off on duty. I met Henshaw, his chief clerk, on my way here. Ye've put yer finger on it, though: yon's the thing I'm feared of. If he gets wind of how matters stand wi' you and Inez, there'll be trouble.'

'But he's always been awfully kind. And you've just said what Colonel Fane owed to him ——'

'Aye, but ye dinna ken Carleton as I do. He was a good friend to Fane — I'll be the last to deny that. It would have meant Robben Island as sure as eggs if it hadna been for him. There's few enough men in his position that would have winked the eye at the law for old times' sake, as he did. But that's done with; and when it comes to dealing wi' yon lassie, there's no telling what'n sort of a maggot he'll get in his head. He's a regular auld wife about infection and the like. Him and me are aye near coming to blows over it. He works himself into a fit over a cold in the nose; as for the leprosy — he's awa' off across the veld like a lamplighter at the mere name of it! If it hadna been for yer friend Bentinck — wi' his influence behind the scenes at Cape Town — I doubt if he could have screwed himself up to stick to the line he did. I've aye thought it showed a kind of grandeur in the man, knowing him as I do.'

'Will he be back soon?'

'Henshaw didna seem to be sure.' My companion stepped on to the verandah and waved me back. 'No another word, now! Leave yon to me. I'm no to be beat on my own ground by Francie Carleton or any one! Into yer bed and get some sleep. I'll be sending for ye at eight sharp.'

Mingled whiffs of iodoform and cooked food greeted me as I was ushered into the house by the river. Lifting a dim lamp from the table, the colored man who had driven me from my quarters moved to a doorway at the far end of the hall, signing to me to follow. After balancing the light precariously on the mantelpiece he slipped out, turning the handle after him.

I gazed round. Heavy mid-Victorian furniture loomed darkly against a wall paper designed in watered crimson. Framed engravings of religious subjects (I recognized works by Sir Noel Paton familiar to me in my Pimlico lodgings) showed spectral white borders amid the semi-obscurity. Antimacassars on chairs, books and woolly mats on tables, footstools on the floor, presented an aspect of inviolable permanence. I remembered having heard that many years before a Miss Niven had, for a brief period, kept house for her brother; what had become of her I had forgotten. A smell of horsehair, dust, and camphorwood impregnated the air. Instinctively I moved to one of the French windows.

It looked on a neglected garden. The rain had ceased; a moon past its full shone in a watery sky. The dwelling revealed itself as larger than I had supposed; a wing with a raised stoep jutted out at right-angles towards the river. A silhouette of tropical-looking trees shut in the opposite side; near the center of the enclosed space a well-head of roughly carved stone cast a pool of shadow among the tangled flowering growths that choked the paths. Weeds banked themselves in black masses against a low wall, beyond which the river, swollen by recent floods, swept through clusters of waving rushes. Clouds came and went; an air of dreary seclusion lay upon the scene.

With the passing of the minutes the atmosphere of the room grew insupportable; jerking up the catch, I forced open the window. As I did so I heard a sound behind me. Starting round, I saw in the rays of the lamp, outlined against the darkness of the threshold, a slender form clothed in black, a face deadly pale under a luster of gold.

Behind, Dr. Niven peered anxiously. On catching sight of me he waved a hand, while propelling his charge gently before him. 'None of yer nonsense now, dearie,' he admonished over his shoulder; the door closed softly.

With arms outstretched I sprang forward.

'Not here!' She shrank back, pointing into the night beyond. Slowly she advanced; as she passed beside me into the moonlight, her eyes sought mine, troubled — changed. The valiance that had ever lain behind their tenderness was gone....

'Beloved!' My whisper trembled above the rushing of the river.

Her chin sank, the droop of an unutterable fatigue fell upon her shoulders; suddenly she swayed. With a sob I caught her to my heart.

The waning moon was high when, hand in hand, we slipped back through the lamp-lit room. A voice greeted us in the obscurity of the hall.

'When ye've said yer good-nights, laddie, I'm here in the surgery.'

Pressing my fingers to her lips, my love thrust me from her and vanished up the stairs. As I harkened on tiptoe to the rustle of her dress something dropped past my cheek.

Hastily I stooped; petals wet with dew met my hand, out of the darkness crept the perfume of a rose....

The yellow glow from an adjacent doorway guided me. As I entered, the doctor turned at his desk. He looked tired and bent, his glance searched my face.

'So ye've fixed it up?'

I nodded.

He stared before him. 'I had a hard tussle wi' her for her happiness.... If it hadna been that yours was in question she'd have been ower much for me.' With a scrape of the chair he got to his feet. 'I'll no be keeping ye.' He picked up an envelope from his blotter. 'Now, laddie, this is your affair, but there's but one way for it that I can see. Get straight back to yer room — the gig's waiting — and write yer story in yer own way to Bentinck; and enclose this. It's got the facts as ye heard them today. He kens me fine; my words will carry a' their weight wi' him.'

Silently I took the envelope.

'Ye must get yer letter posted the night to catch the morning mail. That'll give us a couple of days to wait his reply by wire; I'll need them to knock the last of the fever out of ye.' My companion paused. 'That's the plan I spoke of. Inez canna bide here — there'll be talk in the town already. And, if ye're to marry, neither can you. Carleton may be back any time and put a spoke in our wheel.

Bentinck is the lassie's only blood-relation in the Colony (he was a cousin once removed to her father). His house is the proper place for her the now — in any event. And he's been a good friend to you. I've taken the liberty to write my views about both yer futures. We must leave the rest to him.'

He paced across the room. 'Ye've nothing in writing wi' the Department — about notice?'

I shook my head.

'Weel, ye can leave settling wi' Brand to me. He's more like one of the fish he used to sail among than a human, but he's a gentleman. And there's one comfort about him — whatever he says there'll no be much of it!'

'I should probably have had to go anyway,' I interrupted, and repeated the gist of Grey's remarks after the incident at the inn.

The doctor grunted. 'So much the better. Now that ye've got the money Lady Helen left ye, ye can snap yer fingers at them. That just makes a' the difference. And Inez will have a good bittie more. I'm an executor under her father's will; Bentinck's the other.'

I took a step forward; my throat went suddenly dry. 'You are sure ——'

My companion stared. 'Sure of what?'

'... That I've the right.... I've never told you about — about myself. I know you've guessed, but not — everything.... After what you explained this morning — and — what you've just said — it seems all wrong. I haven't the right to — to ask any one to marry me, ever. And perhaps' — I caught my breath — 'later on — she might find ——' my voice failed.

'Some one else that wanted her?'

I nodded.

'A leper's daughter!' The doctor made a wry face. 'Man!' He put a hand on my shoulder. 'If things hadna turned out the way they have I'd be hard put to it to find a place for her to lay her head — no to speak of anything else! Even Bentinck I mightna be sure of.... And, at best, he's an auld man wi' the angina. Na, na, laddie, ye needna fear! There's none'll be needing yer Inez from ye.' He guided me towards the door.

'Awa' wi' ye now and write yer letter. Ye'll have plenty time to rest the next forty-eight hours.'

Blindly I felt for the handle. I gazed at him wide-eyed. 'Out of the whole world! To think that she and I ——'

He nodded reflectively. 'Aye. Life's queer. My Calvinism's a wee rusty; me and the Personal De'il had kind o' lost sight of each other in the past half-century. But I'll smoke a pipe to him afore I go to my bed the night. He's no done so badly by you two, after all.'

Pulling open the hall door, my companion clapped his hands. A sleepy yelp responded from the trees by the gate; the gig creaked slowly up to the steps. A minute later I was rattling through the fading moonlight.

The doctor proved to be correct; next day I was prostrate with fever. Not until the third morning did I wake up relieved; weak, but clear in the head.

Shortly before noon, as I was resting in my canvas chair after the effort of dressing, Baluka appeared in the doorway and handed me a telegram. With a tightening heart I tore open the envelope.

Bring Inez at once [it ran]. BENTINCK.

Scarcely had I read the message when Dr. Niven arrived on his morning visit. He had been anticipating a reply in these terms. It was arranged that we should leave for Cape Town by the early mail train next day.

The dawn broke cloudy and chill. By candlelight I had packed my few belongings and, for the last time, boiled my discolored little kettle.

As I was swallowing scalding mouthfuls of tea the doctor's voice hailed me from below. In order to avoid the chance of unwelcome encounters at the local station it had been decided that he should drive us to Palmerston, the junction for Port Caroline, about six miles up the line.

His footsteps sounded on the stairs. I rose; my glance flitted round the bare walls. With a sudden poignancy I remembered their welcoming air.... Well — they had fulfilled their promise; they had sheltered my sadness, their snowy surfaces (immaculate still in that untainted atmosphere) had reflected my joy. Instinctively, as I turned to the door, I waved my hand.

'Are yer traps ready?' The doctor nodded to me from the threshold. 'We'll be needing Baluka.'

I halted. 'Isn't he downstairs?'

The other shook his head. 'I shouted on him as I came up. If he's no here he hasna arrived.'

'But ——' Perplexed, I stepped on to the verandah.

'It's aye the way wi' blacks. Never about when they're wanted! I'll wager he's gone on the ran-dan wi' yon money ye gave him yesterday.' My companion brushed past me into the room. 'Come awa', we must manage without him.' He grasped the handle of my trunk.

As we staggered down the stairs with our load I felt curiously disconsolate. It was true that I had paid Baluka his wages the day before, together with a gift from the sum which Dr. Niven had insisted on advancing. But it had not occurred to me that that interview was to represent our good-bye. Knowing the Zulu's habits as I did, I felt certain the doctor's explanation was beside the mark. I kept looking around — over my shoulder....

Then, as we turned the corner of the building, as I saw the gig standing before the steps, my love holding the reins, her eyes raised — expectant, shining, every thought vanished from my consciousness in the rapture of a greeting which was to have beyond it no farewell.

It was a silent drive. The doctor stared ahead. Only as we slowed down near the top of a gradient did he turn and point his whip. 'That'll be yer last look of it.'

We turned. The river lay behind us. The little town climbed from the reedy banks to the green luxuriance of the Reserve. Under its African sky, amid its limitless horizons, it had an air apart. Once again, as its roofs slipped below the crest, Mr. Bentinck's adjective came back — 'out-of-the-world.'

The dusty platforms at Palmerston were deserted. We paced to and fro, the imminence of parting heavy in our hearts. At last the signal went down. Dr. Niven put his arms into ours. 'I'll be missing ye,' he said unsteadily. Inez clung to him. I looked away, a lump in my throat.

'Wha have we here?' He stared over his shoulder. On a veld path beyond the corner of an outbuilding a towering dark figure, gray-headed, naked to the waist, swung into view. As we gazed, with a backward tilt of the shoulders the runner slowed down and vanished behind the end wall. A moment later he reappeared buttoning a blue jacket over his slowly heaving chest. Without a glance in our direction he stationed himself, his arms folded, by the end of the platform.

As I started forward Dr. Niven pressed my elbow. 'Mebbe I had better have a word wi' him. We mustna be saying the wrong thing.'

After a brief colloquy he returned; his manner betrayed a faint embarrassment. 'Aye, he's come to see the last of ye.' Signing to the other to approach, he turned to Inez. 'He's brought ye this.' From between the doctor's thumb and forefinger, swaying in the breeze, rose a single ostrich plume, jet black, startlingly magnificent.

He lowered his voice. 'It's the one he used to wear in his head-ring when he was Cetewayo's general. There'll no be another like it in Africa to-day, I'm thinking.'

Inez took it gravely. As we examined it she twitched my sleeve; swiftly unclasping from her throat the chain I had given her, she slipped it into my hand.

'It must come from you,' she whispered.

For a moment I hesitated, doubtful of the suitability of the gift. Quickly I turned to Dr. Niven. 'Tell him,' I touched the seal, 'that this belonged to one of the Queen's Commanders-in-Chief.'

Baluka listened impassively. Then, at a signal from the doctor, he bent his head.

Reaching up, I snapped the chain round his neck.

The train puffed slowly round a bend; a minute later it jolted and creaked to a standstill.

We climbed into an empty carriage. The doctor had become suddenly gay. 'Na, na, this is no good-bye,' he protested, as Inez flung her arms about him. 'I'll be running down to the Cape before ye know where ye are. It's high time I paid Bentinck a visit, and I've a fine wrangle on wi' the Faculty at the University that needs attending to! I'll be seeing ye soon.'

But I, at least, was not deceived.

The whistle blew. He climbed heavily out of the carriage and slammed the door.

As the engine panted into the somber immensity of the veld we watched and waved; at last even Baluka vanished from our sight.

CHAPTER XXI

In the verandahed house under the spur of Table Mountain which had welcomed my arrival in Africa my story ends. There, amid the release of an undreamed-of freedom, we left behind us the shadows of the past. In its crystal-paneled library, with sunlit gleams from a thousand painted flowers about us, we were married. Thence we set forth, the world before us.

In the candle-lit dining-room the night before our departure Mr. Bentinck and I sat late. We were alone; Inez had gone upstairs to prepare for the morrow. It was to be our last talk together.

We spoke of the past, of our first meeting, that had led, by so strange a path, to the joy of the present. Haltingly I tried to tell him of my gratitude.

He turned his chair to the fire. 'You owe something to yourself, I think,' he rejoined after a pause. 'You remember what I said before you went up-country — about not losing heart?'

I nodded. 'Yes. I always tried to remember that; but,' I hesitated, 'I'm afraid I ended by forgetting.'

He shook his head. 'Not in the final sense. You were equal to your opportunity when it came.'

His gaze fixed itself amid the glowing logs. 'It's that that matters. One must never allow oneself to become' — he sought for the word — 'disabled. Not even in the last resort. For good or ill life is incalculable. In its darkest hours we have the best authority for remembering that no man knows what the day may bring forth.'

Involuntarily I leaned forward. 'Then it is all just chance — what happens to us?' Scenes rose before me: an Eton study — the head boy of the house glancing in over his shoulder; a third-class carriage on an English summer afternoon; a moonlit verandah, a flying girlish figure slipping on a withered branch.... The pictures faded. I stared at the empty air. 'It seems — like that.'

Mr. Bentinck moved in his seat. 'I spoke of life, not of ourselves.' For some moments he was silent. 'I have an old man's dread of seeming to preach. But perhaps I may say this: Try to distinguish between the two things — between "what happens" and the "us" to whom it happens.' Over the arm of his chair he leaned towards the table. 'I am putting it badly. Let me try to explain.' Taking a couple of matches he placed them on the back of his hand at an angle to each other, their points touching; slowly he raised them to the level of my eyes. 'You are looking at the apex of an angle. Yet you see only a straight line?'

I nodded.

His hand sank. 'If we were denizens of a two-dimensional world that would represent the essential phenomenon of our existence. In the nature of things, being confined to a plane, we could perceive only straight lines, such as you saw just now. But the angles would be there. Wherever we moved we should encounter them, be enclosed by them, excluded by them — inexplicably imprisoned, as inexplicably released.'

He paused. 'To us in our universe of three dimensions angles present no objective mystery. But we cannot traverse a yard of this earth of ours,' his hand fluttered above the cloth, 'to or fro, up or down, without impinging on combinations which equally, in their own way, defy solution. We take one path, and all is well: we take another and are maimed for life by the fall of a tree. We walk downstairs as another ascends and the meeting alters the course of our destinies. To these happenings we give the name of chance.'

He dropped the matches back into a tray. 'One must not push the analogy too far; needless to say, scientifically, it is untenable. But there is this to be said for it; it fits in with an immemorial conception — man's impulse to look on high for the clue to his lot. You and I can discern the geometrical figures on a plane because we can look down on them. Is it too fantastic to suppose that the beings of a higher dimension than ours should see in the combinations of what we call chance merely a pattern? I wonder.'

Stiffly he got to his feet. 'You have a busy day before you; we must go.' He crossed to the Sheraton sideboard, on the polished surface of which stood our bedroom candles. Handing one to me he paused, his fingers resting on my sleeve. 'I belong to the old school; I am content to dwell under the Most High. But for you ——' he sighed. 'For young people it is difficult to ask them to accept.... At least so it seems to me. Possibly it may help if you can see it like that; if you can regard the vicissitudes of this life, the inequalities, the trials, even the prizes, as forming something in the nature of a pattern — itself as bereft of ethical basis or significance as the angles we spoke of — but in which are moulded the fortitude, the patience, the inexplicable constancy of man.' Slowly he turned to the door.

On the landing above he halted at my room and held out his hand. As at our parting by the lodge-gate many months before I felt the pressure of his fingers in mine. 'Good night. We shall have little time for talk to-morrow. This is our good-bye. God bless you, my boy.'

A moon in its second quarter was riding high above the cliffs and bastions of Table Mountain as I leaned over the stern of the Castle liner that was to bear us on the first stage of our travels. Inez had run below to fetch a wrap. The slow beat of the propeller rose from a quiet sea; Africa was dropping behind. Once more, and for the last time, my eyes followed the summits and ridges of the peninsula to the profound, mysterious blue beyond. Vividly, as though they were of yesterday, I recalled the wonder, the hope, of that arrival, and — with a tightening in my breast — its loneliness....

A step sounded behind me; ere I could turn, a hand slipped itself into mine.

THE END

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GORDON GARDINER

has seen enough of the world to make the voyaging of Ulysses seem like a week-end holiday: Kimberley, the Dimbula Valley, California, the Cotswolds, Cambridge, Mass., Lake Como, and Asia Minor are just a few of the places where he has left his visiting-card. After sailing the seven seas for several years and visiting nearly every port where the Union Jack is flown, Major Gardiner made a tour of the United States and gave before Professor Copeland's class at Harvard the first lecture in America — or perhaps anywhere — on the works of his friend Joseph Conrad. During the War he acted as Chief Intelligence Officer in Scotland, and he now lives in London 'because it is the only place in the world where a man cursed with a restless heart can find peace.'

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